

Ruth Hall

I Want a Hero

Dear Lord Byron, You would have been highly diverted. 'There is that within me,' you once wrote, 'which shall tire Torture and Time, and breathe when I expire.' Judging by the Byron Society's lengthy celebrations of the 150th anniversary of your death, torture and time were far from tired, and no one seemed quite certain what precisely you had been breathing about.

The opening ceremony was an exhibition by two lady artists of works inspired by your sojourns in Greece and Venice. Comfortable matrons waded through glossy brochures advertising portrait medallions showing you as a Roman senator ('only £25 in a handsome velvet-lined case') and *trompe l'oeil* prints of your personal effects, including the Homeric helmet you designed for your last Greek adventure. You can scarcely afford to sneer at trade, part of your inheritance being derived from distant coalmines, but it did seem a little blatant.

Lord Norwich, opening the exhibition, seemed a little confused about what was being celebrated. Chairman of the 'Venice in Peril' committee, he dashed in, made a speech about how apathetic everybody was for allowing Venice to sink, then rushed out again, with barely a reference to you.

The Byron Society has little in common with your roistering days at Trinity, Newstead, Venice and Pisa, where Shelley accused you of turning yourself and everybody else into vats of claret. 'The trouble is,' said an executive from a pharmaceutical company, 'I've got to work this afternoon and even a small glass of sherry makes my head swim.' I rebuked him with *Don Juan*: 'Man, being reasonable, must get drunk; the best of life is but intoxication.' He was apologetic: 'I know we're supposed to like the satire, but I can't help admiring the lyrics.' 'You realise we *talk* in cantos here, don't you?' said Lady Longford next day. She had just delivered a vote of thanks after a lecture at the Royal Institution: 'If Byron's ghost had been here tonight, he would have been listening with a delighted and enchanted smile.' Along with 30 or so other members of the Byron Society, she was due to leave this week for a fortnight's tour of 'Byron's Greece'.

Some have more obscure motives for belonging to the Byron Society. Mrs Mor-daunt is 84. Her main connection, she said, was that her father, as a small boy, had been patted on the head by Matthew Arnold and told to give up his passion for your poetry. 'It's all very beautiful, dear boy, but he hasn't anything to *teach* us. Wait until you grow up, and then read Wordsworth.' (What was it you called Wordsworth? - 'tadpole of the Lakes?')

'I'll tell you something - people join out of sheer snobbery,' one disaffected member told me. 'Just look at the list of members - Lord Lytton, the Earl of Bessborough, Lord David Cecil - name them, we've got them.'

A non-member, the Marquess of Bath, turned up at yet another Byron exhibition at the Patrick Seale gallery. Amazed by his presence among all the old dears sitting self-consciously on the floor listening to a beautiful young man reading from *Don Juan*, a friend asked him what on earth he was doing there. 'Well, I was at White's,' he said, 'and this fellow came up and said it was about time I got myself educated. So I went along to *The Exorcist* and came here afterwards - all in one day, y'know.'

Then there are the professional Byron scholars. Professor Leslie Marchand, the most respected of your American biographers, shyly volunteered an aphorism: 'Byron was too romantic to refrain from blowing bubbles, and too realistic to resist pricking them.' Others are more dedicated to in-fighting. 'Honestly, I could *kill* Doris Langley Moore,' came one loud and bitter complaint, as wreaths were laid on Friday at the foot of your statue at Hyde Park Corner. (They included the usual bouquet from the lady who died in 1884, leaving a punctiliously administered bequest for an annual wreath and an 'In Memoriam' notice in *The Times*.)

Mrs Moore has taken it upon herself to defend your reputation - a cause that even you had given up as lost. 'I have just written a book,' Margot Strickland explained, 'mentioning Byron's probable paternity of Medora Leigh by his half-sister Augusta. I showed it to Mrs Moore, and she accused me of writing a trendy book. I've never been trendy in my life.' Mrs Strickland was persuaded to include a disclaimer in her study of Byron's women - out next month - dissociating both Mrs Moore and the late Malcolm Elwin, curator of the Lovelace papers, from her interpretations.

As your odious friend Leigh Hunt once said, 'Ah, me! what perils do environ the man who meddles with Lord Byron.' The perils were most in evidence at Sunday's culminating concert at the Theatre Royal. Much to the distress of the Byron Society, the *Guardian* noticed that the concert coincided with the anniversary of the Greek Colonels' coup in 1967. Demonstrators duly appeared and the words 'Filthy Fascist!' were hurled at gentle Philip Hope-Wallace (of the *Guardian*) who was only there for the Berlioz, anyway.

The sad thing is that all the factions are using you. In Athens, the Greek military regime is doing you proud with a mammoth exhibition. Do they know that among your last comments, you complained: 'The Greeks are such damned liars; there never was such an incapacity for veracity shown since Eve lived in Paradise?' Liberals also invoke your name. Do they remember that, as late as 1821, you were inveighing against all forms of government: 'As for democracy, it is the worst of the whole; for what is (in fact) democracy? an Aristocracy of Blackguards.'

People, I fear, have been taking you seriously for the wrong things. Your friend H said about you (how could you tolerate him for so long?): 'He was totally ignorant of the points in dispute on any question of politics.' So, as you might well have said to them, shut up and pass the hock and soda water.

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