



Byron: Life and Legend

Fiona MacCarthy

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This biography reinterprets the great man's life and poetry. MacCarthy casts a fresh eye on Byron's childhood in Scotland, his embattled relations with his mother and his series of relationships with adolescent boys.

Byron: Life and Legend Details

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From Reader Review Byron: Life and Legend for online ebook

Charles Matthews says

This review originally ran in the San Jose Mercury News on December 22, 2002:

George Gordon, Lord Byron, was the first modern celebrity, the original dude with attitude, a prince of 'tudes. He crafted and relished the reputation that was summed up in the journal of one of his mistresses, Lady Caroline Lamb, who called him "mad -- bad -- and dangerous to know" (adjectives that many would have applied to Lady Caroline herself).

Fiona MacCarthy's very readable new biography tries to sort out the real Lord Byron from the complexities, of which there were plenty. He was an English aristocrat whose hero was Napoleon and whose politics were radical -- he joined the revolutionary Carbonari in Italy, and when he died in 1824 (from an infection worsened by the common medical practice of bleeding the patient) he was leading an attempt to liberate Greece from Turkey.

In the view of some contemporaries he was an effeminate dandy. In his portraits, many of which are handsomely reproduced in the book, he's costumed, primped and petulant. When he grew fat from self-indulgence he would crash-diet himself into thinness. He had a deformed foot that he took efforts to conceal, yet he was celebrated for such feats of physical vigor as swimming the Hellespont.

He was a womanizer who claimed to have made around 200 conquests during his two-year stay in Venice, but in his letters he expressed revulsion at female physicality (he particularly disliked watching women eat), and may have had what MacCarthy calls an "innate sexual orientation toward boys."

In her attempt to get behind the image and see what drove Byron to create and perpetuate it, MacCarthy, like most modern biographers, zeroes in on sex. Much of Byron's behavior stems, she suggests, from sexual ambivalence. There's ample evidence that as a student at Harrow and Cambridge, and on youthful travels in Greece and Turkey, Byron had numerous homosexual liaisons.

Byron's homosexuality, MacCarthy asserts, reinforced his sense of himself as outsider, especially since sodomy was a capital crime in the England of his day. "England labeled as degenerate the instincts Byron experienced as natural," MacCarthy says, and provided the genesis of Byron's "feeling of belonging to no country." His love of Greece, she asserts, began "because homosexual relations in the East had none of the stigma they bore in his own country."

Awareness of the risks to his reputation -- and, considering the English law, his life -- may have entered into Byron's image-making as well, MacCarthy suggests. Byron hung his early sexuality in the closet, setting out on "frenetic" relationships with women that, MacCarthy asserts, had "an element of cruelty engendered by the knowledge that he was being false to his own heart." The result was that he adopted the manner we see as "quintessentially Byronic . . . the bravura self-mockery of someone forced to recognise his outlaw state."

MacCarthy portrays a Byron who was more sinned against -- by a narrow-minded society -- than sinning. Certainly we shouldn't be shocked that Byron was gay. But the evidence of his pedophilia is disturbing, as is the emotional brutality toward women that marks his countless heterosexual liaisons, including the one with his half-sister, Augusta. He was driven permanently into exile by the rumors about this incestuous relationship and the whispered allegations of sodomy that arose when Byron and his wife, Annabella, separated in 1816.

On the other hand, the scandal may have inaugurated the modern truism that there's no such thing as bad publicity. When he died, eight years after being exiled from England, the Times of London called him "the most remarkable Englishman of his generation." In the two-chapter coda to her biography -- the "legend" part of the book -- MacCarthy points out that the image of the Byronic hero was so potent that even such eminent Victorians as Matthew Arnold and John Ruskin were able to overlook what they surely would have regarded

as serious sexual misconduct in a contemporary. And when Emily Bronte wrote "Wuthering Heights," she introduced "Byronic hints of incest in the love between Heathcliff and Catherine."

By their day, the story of Byron's life had been sanitized by his early biographer, Thomas Moore. And it helped that the Byronic hero was "dashing heterosexuality," as MacCarthy puts it. The heroes of his poems -- Childe Harold, Manfred, Cain -- are wanderers and outcasts, or else they're scamps like Don Juan. Readers responded to "Byron's poetic concept of himself as a man grandly and fatally flawed, who had lived so intensely and sinned so outrageously that he, and he alone, was doomed to suffer the retribution of the gods." The image may have been a more significant creation than anything Byron wrote. The long poems that made him famous -- "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage," "The Giaour," "The Corsair" and the like -- are tedious reading today. And as pleasant as some of Byron's lyrics are, they don't stand up against the work of his great contemporaries. They lack the imagery and depth of the odes of Keats and Shelley, the haunting magic of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" and "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and the penetrating insight of Wordsworth's best poetry. Byron also left no significant critical prose that compares with Keats' letters, Shelley's "Defence of Poetry," Coleridge's lectures on Shakespeare or Wordsworth's "Preface to 'Lyrical Ballads.'"

It may simply be that poetry came so easily to Byron that he didn't take it seriously. MacCarthy asserts that in his youth, Byron saw "the writing of poetry less as a serious professional occupation than as a diversion, a knack, a self-indulgence. In the scale of human achievement, as he viewed it at this time, rhyming did not count."

There's not much evidence that this attitude ever fundamentally changed. His most enduring work is his comic masterpiece, "Don Juan," on which he worked on almost until his death (it was left unfinished). The poem's lasting charm lies in the casualness with which Byron handles the intricacies of ottava rima, coming up with rhymes like "Oh! ye lords of ladies intellectual, / Inform us truly, have they not hen-peck'd you all?" Byron's wordplay evokes the song lyrics of Lorenz Hart and Ira Gershwin more than it does the verses of Shelley and Wordsworth.

MacCarthy is undaunted by the enormous amounts of information available on Byron's life -- everyone who knew him seems to have kept diaries, journals and boxes full of letters. She has produced a huge but enticing book that takes its subject seriously -- perhaps too seriously. I wish she had found a way to lighten the gloom of her exploration of the darker side of Byron. His letters are buoyant with humor, and his comic and satiric poems -- which, in addition to "Don Juan," include "Beppo" and "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers" -- retain a freshness that his "serious" work lacks.

The book could also have used more critical edge -- she discusses the poems hardly at all, and makes no effort to assess their comparative merits or to view Byron's work in the context of the great contemporary literary ferment of English Romanticism. But given the turmoil of Byron's life, both public and private, it's perhaps both necessary and revealing that his literary career fades into the background.

Esther ? says

I'm even entirely sure how to go about reviewing a biography since this is the first biography of its kind that I've read.

All I can say is that I'm glad I chose Byron.

Whilst reading this book and carrying around with me, so many people commented on how tiny the writing is and how dense the text is and wasn't I bored yet? The answer, always, was no. How, when reading about Byron's life, could anyone be bored? I read it over a period of months and couldn't help myself from coming

back to it between reading other books. The writing style is addictive, the detail almost personal.

The most amazing thing about Byron is perhaps that while alive he gave those around him a sense of awe and a feeling of connection to him, even if he felt no connection himself. People wanted to know him and actually felt like they did. In his death, he still manages to achieve this. When reading his work or information about him, Byron comes across so vividly that you can almost see him there, lounging in the shade of a tree in Italy. MacCarthy brings him back to life with her abundance of resources, journals and accounts from the people who came across Byron in their lifetimes. One thing is for sure, those who met Byron were not quick to forget him.

Complex and sensitive, yet unpredictable and sometimes cruel, it seems that nobody really ever knew the poet. Maybe Teresa, Hobhouse, Lady Melbourne, and Augusta came close. The stories retold by MacCarthy only further prove how far Byron's friends went after his death to preserve what was left of his reputation and to stop further damaging journals from being published. Even now, things such as Byron's wikipedia page is only the tip of the iceberg of who he really was. When I visited Newstead Abbey recently, I was told by the tour guide that Nottingham City Council has them omit details from the tour that are too graphic concerning his bisexuality, his abundance of lovers across Europe, substance abuse, and his incestuous relationship with Augusta. Even now, in 2014, Byron's life is simply seen as too taboo, and I can only imagine how it was viewed when he was alive. When people describe him as the first rockstar type celebrity ever, they're not wrong.

When reading about Byron it's easy to forget that he was a real man, who lived and breathed in the same world. He comes across like a fictional character, and maybe that's because his legacy goes on in the Byronic Hero. It amazes me how one man could leave such an impact in his short life. And while it might've been a short life, it was definitely well-lived. The reaction to his death, particularly amongst those who knew him best, proves this perfectly. Especially touching were Hobhouse and Fletcher's reactions, which were poignant and sad. The people of England, who had been quick to shun him, welcomed him back in death, with people flooding to buy tickets to view his body, and people leaning out of windows to watch his funeral procession. It shows that the line between hero and villain can be very, very thin, and Byron was always walking the line.

There was so much that I didn't know about Byron before reading *Life and Legend*, and it has only fuelled my fascination (and obsession, let's be honest.) Even with such vivid images of Byron portrayed, he's still an enigma to us today. He was problematic and flawed and uncaring, yet often comes across so likeable and witty, sometimes childish, but always thinking. He was the result of everything he had endured, and if the blood-letting hadn't quickened his death, the constant stress might've done. Reading about his death, it feels as though someone like him was meant for the hero's death, as the Greeks treated it. While it would've been brilliant to read more of Don Juan and to read about him dying somewhere warm, content for once in his life, it seems fitting that he died in the midst of trying to do something he thought was right.

It will be hard to find another biography to read next, because who could ever compare? I never thought I'd reread a biography, but I know I'll come back to *Life and Legend* again someday. I mean, after referring to it as the Byron Bible a few times when telling people about it, how could I not come back to it?

Jessica says

Undoubtedly the best biography of Byron available. MacCarthy's research is both deep and wide, and she

addresses even the stickiest or most speculative parts of Byron's life with candor and a healthy dose of skepticism. It's a great read, and very informative.

Laura says

Whew! It's a good biography, but honestly - 8pt font? For 600 pages??? I deserve a medal for finishing!!

Since reading *The White Devil* a year ago I'd wanted to know more about the Mad, Bad Lord and this bio is definitely "more". The author goes over his life in great detail (mostly) and has had access to papers and letters that previous biographers haven't been able to use. She dissects the questions of his lameness (right foot? left foot? club foot? polio?), his sexuality, his education, his poetry, his relationships with friends, his health (and odd diet) and finally his involvement with the Greek independence movement to great effect; why the dissolution of his marriage and how that affected his reputation is given a mere 40 pages while his last year is given more space is a huge question. Still, if you want to learn more about him, this is probably a good place to start.

Hence the four stars: physically difficult to read and a major part of his life semi-glossed over.

Shelly says

I don't typically read biographies, but this was a fun read. After spending the second half of my semester focusing on one part of Lord Byron's life, it was refreshing to read about something other than his separation. While my favorite parts of the book included the relationship between Byron and John Cam Hobhouse -- they were fun friends! -- I was fascinated by the connections between Byron's self image and his relationship with his sister, Augusta.

There seemed to be a lot of focus on Byron and his eating habits, fear of gaining weight, and his weight fluctuation (just like Oprah!) He was so conscience of his image and was especially finicky when it came to his portraits and busts. (It's cool LB, I untag myself on Facebook ALL THE TIME!) He would refuse them to be used if they were (thought by him to be) that bad. Though his vanity was off the charts, I still couldn't resist his charms! And neither could his sister, Augusta!

There were rumors and speculation of their incestuous relationship, but now we can safely say, "Yes, they knocked boots." What I found interesting is that Augusta was similar to Byron in that they had a similar personality traits and mannerisms (hey! so do my sister and me!) and referring back to Byron's vain tendencies, I can't help but wonder if (at least for Byron) this was a narcissistic relationship. Byron was attracted to himself, and Augusta was a pretty close second. -- Although, it could also be argued that Byron wasn't vain, but incredibly insecure (or both).

I also liked reading about the progression of Byron. As I neared toward the end of the book, and Byron's time in Greece, it was odd to think back about his early life in Greece and how much he matured. Good work, LB!

Marigold says

Very long but engaging bio; I read some Byron in college (English Lit major, after all) but honestly didn't know that much about him except that he was a 19th century celebrity - maybe one of the first celebrity writers - famous for his wealth, status, physical beauty, and lifestyle as much as his poetry. I knew he spent a lot of time in Italy and Greece, & that he got involved in a Greek war. I knew he was involved with Lady Caroline Lamb and that she called him "mad, bad, and dangerous to know." (Always an intriguing combo when it comes to Dead Poets.)

Now that I know more about him, I feel like I have a better idea of the real Byron and the background of his life and times. I think he was probably fun to be with and a pain in the ass! It sounds like it's possible he was bipolar, though MacCarthy doesn't speculate about that; she mentions that he went through major depressions but it sounds like he was also a bit manic to me. I don't remember knowing that he had a disability affecting one of his feet. He seems to have inspired great love in some people, great dislike in others, and both in quite a few. He definitely seems to have treated people quite cavalierly in general, which makes it challenging to find him admirable. But he was definitely not boring!

Overall an interesting read. Oh, I also have to note that I decided to take this on vacation with me - on a road trip through eastern Oregon! My husband and I like to build in plenty of relaxing and reading time in our trips, & sometimes we go to quiet bars where we can actually bring our books, sip a drink & read - which we did this time - & that makes me wonder if I'm the only person ever to have read about Byron in a bar in Halfway, Oregon & a park in Pendleton!

Katherine says

If you want to know all the details of Byron's life - from each and every tourist site he visited on his travels to which day he had diarrhea (ate too many oranges) - this is the book for you. If you are after insight into what made Byron such a brilliant, sparkling and influential figure - and maybe feel some of the extraordinary charm he exerted over so many men and women - then this book is a long and fruitless read that will fail to deliver.

Rather than a fascinating biographer, the author appears to be an accomplished documenter. The book is filled with many, many facts (the clanging you hear is yet another non sequitur she can't bear to leave out, yet can't quite work in). She can be very detailed about dates and places but fails to provide much in the way of insight and the writing remains pedestrian.

As an example, we are repeatedly told that Byron was possessed of remarkable empathy - yet nothing is related that illustrates this, but tale after tale of his careless cruelty. Secondary personalities can be a bit thin (I'm convinced that Mary Shelley is far nicer than she is presented here, and Leigh Hunt far more vile). The power and significance of Byron's writing is poorly presented. I suspect this is because the author is a general biographer, rather than an informed Romantic scholar.

All in all, I'm disappointed (and slightly resentful) to have gotten through almost 700 pages about a rather unpleasant chap and have him still remain elusive.

Caroline says

Byron is one of those historical figures about which I've never really known very much, outside of stereotype and caricature. Indeed, I've always thought I knew Byron better through the literary characters inspired by him (the classic Byronic hero) than the man himself. And the one thing that most impressed itself upon me on reading this book is...Byron didn't seem very Byronic at all. We all know the Byronic mode - brooding, rugged, magnetic, arrogant, mysterious. Mr Rochester. Heathcliff. And on reading this book, Byron himself didn't seem very much like the stereotype. Or perhaps more appropriately, he was all these things but that wasn't all he was. To be honest, I came away with a view of Byron more akin to Oscar Wilde than Heathcliff. And that's a big difference.

This is an excellent biography, one of the best I've ever read. MacCarthy is under no illusions as to Byron's flaws and she doesn't gloss over anything. Especially not the sex. Particularly not the sex. And good Lord, there was a lot of sex. This could almost be subtitled 'A Sexual Biography' for the amount of focus on Byron's conquests. And the man had a few - male and female, young and old. No wonder he died relatively young!

The one aspect that the author didn't focus on, and it's one area I really felt the lack, was any kind of explanation of why Byron inspired the hype that he did. He was an incredibly polarising figure, perhaps one of the first almost 'modern' celebrities, but I never got a clear sense of just what it was about Byron that made him the focus of such hysterical attention. He was young, he was handsome, he was charismatic and arrogant and fashionable, but so were many other 'dandies' - was it the combination of all that with his contempt for his society and willingness to play the exile? It would have been nice to have more an analysis of this.

But that's a minor flaw. This is a magisterial work, probably the definitive biography on Byron - erudite, engaging, readable, comprehensive. It would be hard to find a better read.

Julie Bozza says

An excellent biography of Byron - and I've read a few by now. To be honest, during Byron's early years I was feeling as if I'd read it all (or most of it) before. But during the later years, especially once he reaches Venice, the book really came into its own. I felt there was more depth, detail and interest than I'd found before.

The time Byron spent in Cephalonia and Missolonghi in Greece were dealt with particularly thoroughly, for which I was grateful. It's almost as if other biographies rush through to the end at that point, as if it were all a *fait accompli*. MacCarthy shows that it was not, and that Byron was in some ways at his most engaged and thoughtful during those last months; patient and considerate, with only a few small incidents as exceptions.

One of my pet frustrations is when biographies basically stop at the first possible moment: '...and so he died. The End.' But a person's life doesn't end with them, not even for 'ordinary' folks. I want to know more about what happens to those around them; what happened to their children and grandchildren; how their work and influence continued on through the ages. So I was very pleased to find that there was still over 50 pages to go even once Byron's own end had been reached. I was only half satisfied, though.

A detailed chapter included the story of how Byron's remains were dealt with, being shipped from Greece

back to England, and eventually buried in his family vault. Another two chapters discussed his influence on European writers and artists, and on Englishmen. Which was all of great interest. But the ongoing tales of his daughter, other family members, and his loyal servants (some of whom were with him throughout much of this book's story) were barely mentioned in passing if at all. So I was very well answered in one way, but hardly at all in another.

Still! I think there is rarely one definitive biography of a person, as each one can add to the whole picture painted. MacCarthy's work is certainly one of the key texts, and adds immensely to my sense of who this fascinating man might have been.

Michael says

A magnificent book. This is the third biography of the great poet I've read, and is certainly at least equal-best of the three.

I have to admit, I wasn't drawn to it at first. MacCarthy is an unobtrusive biographer. She has done an extraordinary amount of research, and has accumulated an enormous load of facts. She prefers to let the facts speak for themselves; when she does analyse Byron's character, she does so concisely, usually in a single sentence: "He had an extraordinary resilience of spirit." "His deformity, his proneness to depression, his consciousness of his sexual apartness: all these gave Byron an extra degree of sensitivity." At first, I felt a little at sea among all the details, and wanted more guidance: what should I think of this wonderful, flawed man? But over the course of the biography, the impressions accumulate, and in the final section, "The Byron Cult," MacCarthy changes tack. As she tells the story of Byron's afterlife, of his reputation, of his many fans, it begins to become clear what sort of man she thinks he was, and what sort of man others have thought him. Remarkably, this is the most exciting part of the book—even eclipsing the great excitement of Byron's life itself, with its loves and losses and adventures.

So the book succeeds in capturing Byron's most salient aspect: his titanic stature, his power to astonish and inspire despite his moral flaws.

MacCarthy writes beautifully, and the book is extremely readable. This alone would give it a high place among the 100-or-so biographies that exist of Lord Byron. But it is also distinctive for another reason: its frank discussion of Byron's sexual proclivities, and its balanced consideration of the evidence for some of the more controversial aspects of his personal life (especially his affair with his half-sister Augusta Leigh). MacCarthy does not judge: she treats not only Byron with sympathy and tolerance, but also the prudish friends who concealed his sex life from the world.

A splendid read for a beach holiday, an inspiration to teenagers looking for a hero, a commanding work of scholarship—this is a really great book.

Siria says

This is an excellent, excellent biography - probably the best I've read on Byron to date. McCarthy manages the task which all too often seems to defeat biographers: balancing a sympathetic analysis of Byron's character with an objectivity which allows her to deal with the less engaging, often contradictory, sides of

Byron's character.

There is also a sense of freshness about the work, in part because McCarthy has been afforded access to the Murray Archive (the archives of John Murray II, the publisher of most of Byron's works), and has used some papers which have never before come to public attention. The research which the author must have done both in this archive, and in other sources, shines through clearly in the text - it's always erudite, but never pedantic.

I particularly liked how McCarthy helped to place Byron in a wider literary and cultural context, both amongst his contemporaries and amongst later authors. The links and influences to such things as the Brontë sisters' *Angria juvenilia* was interesting, especially since I'd never really considered them in that light before.

I do have some slight nitpicks about the book. Although this is a biography and attention is, quite rightly, focused on Byron's life, I did feel as if McCarthy ignored any real attempts at analysis of the poems themselves. There were some quotations, but they felt annoyingly brief. I also felt as if she glossed over the circumstances that surrounded some of Byronmania - she catalogues some of Byron's more intense fans, yes (Caroline Lamb always horrifies me), but I found it hard to get a sense of the Byron-as-public-figure that inspired this mass hysteria.

There was also, I thought, the slightest of lapses of consistency of logic in analysing whether Byron was the father of an illegitimate child by a maid-servant of his in his youth, and whether he was the father of Elizabeth Medora by his half-sister Augusta.

Despite all this, however, this is still a very well-written book, and the one biography that I would recommend above all others for someone looking to be introduced to the life of Lord Byron

Ashley says

This is an AMAZING biography for anyone interested in Byron. I stumbled around a while trying to research which bio seemed to get the most praise and didn't rely on gossip/scandal to encompass most of the pages, which brought me to *Life and Legend*. It is an exhaustive study and will leave you with a substantially better understanding of Byron.

Jake says

When it comes to biography, I'm a sucker for thick, hardbound, footnote laden books. I want something that took years to research, and another couple years to write. *Byron: Life and Legend* is such a book.

Despite having written many great poems, certainly several of the best Romantic Era poems, Lord Byron is remembered as much or more for simply being Lord Byron. Sensationalism and gossip haunts his legacy as much as they haunted him in life. Sleeping with your half-sister and retaining a fondness for boys years after you cease being one are definitely scandalous details. But they aren't the full measure of this childe. (Byron fans will know I spelled that last word correctly.)

Byron, as I've come to know him, was a tormented, self-destructive man. He was also a bad spouse and a bad

parent. Nonetheless, he was a compelling human with--would you believe it--a conscience.

This book makes the legend human, without sacrificing the vitality of the legend. It is a thorough work, and it is as objective as any biography of Lord Byron is likely to be. For people wanting a compelling look beyond the poetry, this is a great resource.

Sheila says

For the Byronistas, this is a feast of a book. Intelligently written and scrupulously researched, it brings the poet, hedonist and his rackets world to life

Elaine says

He had a deformed foot and wasn't a nice man
