

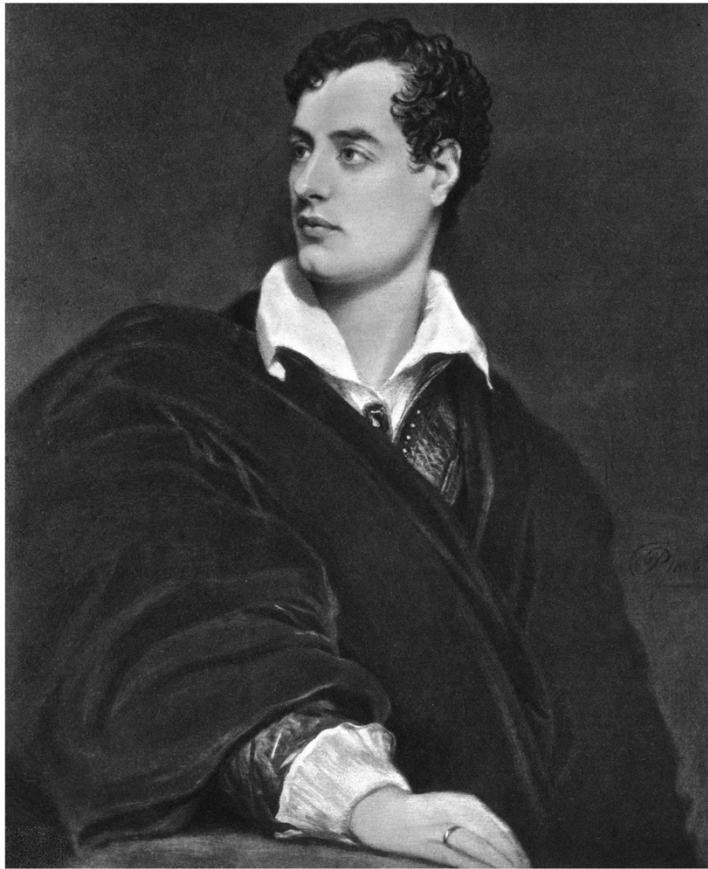
# A new look at the original Romantic heartthrob, Lord Byron

On the 200th anniversary of his death, two new books explore the life and work of the poet who inspired t  
hero — proud, introspective and magnetic



Review by [Michael Dirda](#)

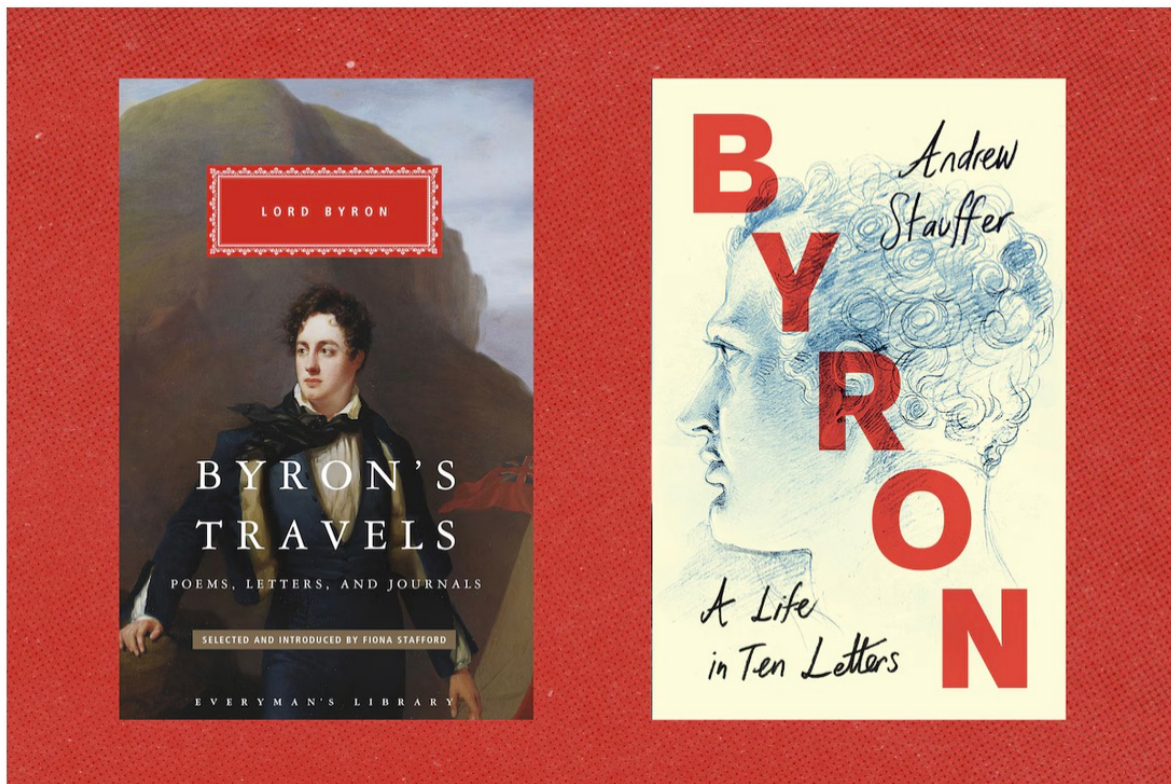
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Lord Byron (1788-1824) was a leading figure in the Romantic movement. (Ann Ronan Pictures/Print Collector/Getty Images)

On April 19, 1824, Lord Byron died at Missolonghi, where he had gone to lend his name and give financial support to the Greek war for independence from the Ottoman Empire. After being drenched by a sudden rainstorm while out riding, the poet developed a fever, from which he might well have recovered had it not been for some disastrous medical treatment, chiefly bleeding with leeches that left him weak and dehydrated. He was just 36.

Except for Napoleon, Byron could have legitimately claimed to be the most famous person of his time, partly because he'd been branded — by the infatuated (and married) Caroline Lamb — as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know.” Not only a major poet, especially in his mock epic “Don Juan,” he was also one of the half-dozen best letter writers in English. On the 200th anniversary of his death, two excellent new books reveal this Romantic heartthrob, rebel and wanderer from fresh angles: Andrew Stauffer’s “Byron: A Life in Ten Letters” and “Byron’s Travels: Poems, Letters, and Journals,” compiled by Fiona Stafford.



(Everyman's Library; Cambridge University Press)

Stauffer, president of the Byron Society of America and a professor at the University of Virginia, has essentially produced a concise biography of the poet by reprinting, explaining and adding context to 10 of his best letters. In this way, we hear Byron’s rapid-fire conversational voice on the page as he spills out his thoughts and relates his latest misadventures to his mother, lovers or friends. To each letter, Stauffer then appends an engaging, fact-rich essay, augmented by relevant quotations from Byron’s poetry and insightful comments of his own. Further enhancing the book’s attractiveness, Cambridge University Press has produced a physically elegant volume, one you’ll enjoy holding as well as reading.



Andrew Stauffer. (Courtesy of Andrew Stauffer)

Byron was born in 1788 with a slightly deformed foot, about which he remained sensitive his whole life. His birth name was George Gordon, but following the deaths of two relatives, he suddenly inherited a title and a new name, considerable wealth, and a dilapidated medieval pile called Newstead Abbey. There, he would throw orgiastic, mildly sacrilegious parties with his classmates from Harrow and Cambridge, who would dress as monks and call their host the Abbot. For three years, Byron then toured the Mediterranean and the Near East, sampling the local wines and other delicacies — including pretty girls and, it now seems established, handsome boys. Out of these experiences emerged the first two semi-autobiographical cantos of “Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage.” They took London by storm in 1812. As their author later recalled, “I awoke one morning and found myself famous.”

Celebrity naturally led to invitations from the chicest London hostesses, and the charismatic Byron soon became the cynosure of many female eyes. But, as he once wrote, “Alas! the love of women.” While he sometimes initiated a seduction, just as often he was the one pursued, as in the case of Lamb, who once dressed as a pageboy to sneak into Byron’s bedroom. In looking back over his love life, the poet only half-facetiously insisted, “I have been more ravished myself than anybody since the Trojan War.”

Unfortunately, Augusta Leigh, the woman he came to love most deeply, wasn’t just married, she was also his-half sister. In the Romantic era, sisters often took on an erotic charge, being viewed as the spiritual complements or mirrors of their unhappy brothers. Besides, as Byron’s friend Shelley observed, “Incest, like many other incorrect things, is a very poetical circumstance.” In Byron’s dramatic poem, “Manfred,” the Faustian protagonist suffers from the memory



of the dead sister he adored. Leigh's daughter, Medora, was almost certainly fathered by Byron.

In an attempt to settle down, the poet married Annabella Milbanke, but their relationship, while affectionate at first, quickly deteriorated. Milbanke eventually separated from the abusive Byron but did give birth to their daughter, Ada, who would become the mathematician Ada Lovelace, a pioneer in the development of the computer or, as she and Charles Babbage called it, "the analytical engine."

Byron's scandalous affairs and defiant flouting of hypocritical conventions — "I was born for opposition"— soon led to his becoming a social outcast, and he left Britain for good in 1816. En route to Italy, he passed a summer on Lake Geneva at the Villa Diodati in the company of his doctor, William Polidori, and the irregular couple Percy Bysshe Shelley and Mary Godwin Shelley, as well as Mary's stepsister, Claire Clairmont, already pregnant with Byron's child. One stormy night, it was proposed that they all — Clairmont excepted — write ghost stories. The poets only scribbled fragments before giving up, but Polidori produced "The Vampyre" — a novella that reimagined a traditional folk-monster as a Byron look-alike, the suavely aristocratic Lord Ruthven — and Mary Shelley began work on the most influential of all Gothic novels, "Frankenstein." In due course, Clairmont gave birth to the blue-eyed Allegra, who would succumb to a fever at age 5.



"The Separation, a Sketch from the private life of Lord Iron," by Isaac Cruikshank (1816) from "Byron: A Life in Ten Letters." (Courtesy of Jack Wasserman)

By then, the restless poet had moved to Italy, where after two wildly promiscuous years in Venice — the city of “vile assignations, and adulterous beds,/ Elopements, broken vows, and hearts, and heads” — he settled into relative domesticity in Ravenna and Genoa with Teresa Guiccioli, his “last attachment.” Following two relatively happy years as her cavalier servente, Byron decided to lend his personal and financial support to the Greek fight for independence. All too soon he would be dead, leaving behind brokenhearted friends and lovers but also a new literary archetype: the proud, moodily introspective and sexually magnetic Byronic hero, half Apollo, half Satan. Examples range from Alexandre Dumas’s dark avenger, the Count of Monte Cristo, and Emily Brontë’s tempestuous Heathcliff to the myriad bad boys and brooding heroes of modern romance novels.

Besides women, travel, wine and dogs, Byron loved books and could readily quote ancient classics, Shakespeare and 18th-century literature. He also spoke fluent Italian and a smattering of other languages, including Armenian. Most importantly, though, writing poetry allowed him to both re-experience and reflect on his multifaceted life and to critique contemporary mores. While his Weltschmerz-infused lyrics — “She walks in beauty like the night,” “So we’ll go no more a-roving,” “Maid of Athens, ere we part” — are anthology standards, he truly excels at the satirical long poem, such as “The Vision of Judgment” (it opens “Saint Peter sat by the celestial gate:/ His keys were rusty, and the lock was dull”) and the endlessly entertaining “Don Juan,” the erotic adventures of its rather hapless Spanish hero, recounted by a jaded narrator who insists, “I sketch your world exactly as it goes.”

Byron’s style here isn’t just sprightly, it’s positively rollicking and peppered with epigrammatic phrases worthy of his poetic mentor, Alexander Pope. That said, its presentation of women is cynical, to say the least. Still, there’s no denying the Stephen Sondheim-like cleverness of Byron’s rhymes: “But — oh ye lords of ladies intellectual!/ Inform us truly, have they not henpecked you all?” More reprehensible in its implications is perhaps his most famous couplet, summarizing Juan’s first seduction: “A little still she strove and much repented,/ And whispering, ‘I will ne’er consent’ — consented.”



Four muses with musical instruments mourn Byron on his deathbed 1824. One of them lays a wreath around an urn on a funerary monument. (Sepia Times/Universal Images Group/Getty Images)

In general, Byron's highly personal poetry is most effective when one knows something of his life — hence the value of Stauffer's book (and longer standard biographies by Peter Quennell, Leslie Marchand and Fiona MacCarthy). His letters bring us even closer to the man himself. Let me quote just one example that captures his very self and voice. He is writing in 1817 to the Irish poet Thomas Moore about the third canto of "Childe Harold":

"I am glad you like it; it is a fine indistinct piece of poetical desolation, and my favorite. I was half mad during the time of its composition, between metaphysics, mountains, lakes, love unextinguishable, thoughts unutterable, and the nightmare of my own delinquencies. I should, many a good day, have blown my brains out, but for the recollection that it would have given pleasure to my mother-in-law; and, even *then*, if I could have been certain to haunt her ..."



Fiona Stafford, (Somerville College)

While collections of the poet's work are plentiful, "Byron's Travels: Poems, Letters and Journals," edited by Oxford University professor Fiona Stafford, is unusual in its mosaic-like organization. Each section combines chronology and geography, tracking the itinerant poet's life by assembling his reflections on the places that shaped him, from his hot youth in England to his early death at Missolonghi. As a result, Byron emerges as his own Boswell, telling us, for example, that he grinds his teeth at night, but also sharing such melancholy observations as this one:

"When one subtracts from life infancy (which is vegetation), — sleep, eating, and swilling — buttoning and unbuttoning — how much remains of downright existence? The summer of a dormouse."

In England, Byron is being celebrated this year with scholarly conferences and a commemorative service at Westminster Abbey. A statue of the poet will soon be moved to a more prominent place in Hyde Park. Here in the United States, we can at least read books like Stauffer's and Stafford's, and perhaps raise a glass in Byron's memory. If we happen to be drinking claret, I suspect that one glass won't be enough.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/books/2024/04/18/new-look-original-romantic-heartthrob-lord-byron/>