

LORD BYRON AND NEWSTEAD ABBEY¹

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Byron seems to have been at least two people, in the same body:

Temperate I am, yet never had a temper;
Modest I am, yet with some slight assurance;
Changeable too, yet somehow “Idem semper;”
Patient, but not enamoured of endurance;
Cheerful, but sometimes rather apt to whimper;
Mild, but at times a sort of “Hercules furens;”
So that I almost think the same skin,
For one without, has two or three within. (*Don Juan* XVII

st.11)

We should not therefore be surprised if we can find no consistency in his attitude towards the ancestral seat he inherited unexpectedly in 1798, at the age of ten, on the death of his great uncle, the fifth Lord Byron.

Byron wrote poetry expressing nostalgic fondness for Newstead, initially in *Childe Harold* (for which see below), and later in a verse-letter to his half-sister Augusta:

I did remind thee of our own dear lake
By the old hall which may be mine no more;
Leman's is fair, but think not I forsake
The sweet remembrance of a dearer shore:
Sad havoc time must with my memory make
Ere *that* or *thou* can fade these eyes before –
Though like all things which I have loved, they are
Resigned for ever, or divided far. (*Epistle to Augusta*, st.10)

In his masterpiece, *Don Juan*, Byron describes some features visible still today:

It stood embosomed in a happy valley,
Crowned by high Woodlands where the Druid Oak

Beckett: John Beckett (with Sheila Aley), *Lord Byron and Newstead, the Aristocrat and the Abbey*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002. BLJ: *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols, John Murray, 1973-94. NLS: National Library of Scotland.

Stood like Caractacus in act to rally
His host, with broad Arms 'gainst the Thunder-Stroke;
And from beneath his boughs were seen to sally
The dappled foresters as Day awoke –
The branching Stag swept down with all his herd,
To quaff a Brook which murmured like a Bird.

Before the Mansion lay a lucid lake,
Broad as transparent, deep, and freshly fed
By a river which its softened way did take
In currents through the calmer water spread
Around; the wild fowl nestled in the brake,
And sedges brooding in their liquid bed;
The Woods sloped downwards to its brink, and stood
With their green faces fixed upon the flood.

Its outlet dashed into a steep Cascade,
Sparkling with foam, until again subsiding
Its shriller Echoes, like an infant made
Quiet, sank into the softer ripples, gliding
Into a rivulet – and, thus allayed,
Pursued its course, now gleaming, and now hiding
Its windings through the woods – now clear, now blue,
According as the Skies their shadows threw. (*Don Juan* XIII

sts.56-8)

Despite his apparent affection for Newstead, Byron was also responsible for selling the house and the estate.

Normally an aristocrat could not sell his estate, because he did not own it outright, but held it in trust for his heirs – who would not be able to sell it either. Thus the blue blood of England was protected against its own well-documented tendencies to live badly, waste its birthright, and self-destruct. But, owing to an error on the part of the fifth Lord's lawyers in 1773, the Sixth Lord Byron – the poet – inherited it, not as a life tenant, as was usual, but as owner of the fee simple: that is, it was his absolute possession. With the death at the siege of Calvi of the fifth lord's grandson, William John Byron (on July 31st 1794), the fifth lord thought that *he* would regain the fee simple, and thus control of the future of Newstead; instead, he found that the estate was to go to the next male heir within the extended family – namely, the poet, who was

the grandson of his younger brother, Admiral “Foul Weather” Jack. The fifth lord had, by the time the poet inherited, denuded Newstead of everything valuable, including the great picture collection, which had contained works by Rubens, Canaletto, Holbein, Van Dyke and Titian.²

W.S. Hasleden, who had worked in the chambers of John Hanson, lawyer to both the fifth and sixth lords, recalled in 1853:

Upon the marriage of his son, he [*the fifth lord*], as any other father would do, granted a settlement of his property, including the Newstead Abbey estate; but by some unaccountable inadvertence or negligence of the lawyers employed, the ultimate reversion of the fee-simple of the property, instead of being left, as it ought to have been, in the father as the owner of the estates, was limited to the heirs of the son. And upon his death, and failure of the issue of the marriage, the unfortunate father, *this eccentric lord*, found himself robbed of the fee-simple of his own inheritance, and left merely the naked tenant for life, without any legal power of raising money upon it, or even of cutting down a tree.³

The law was afterwards changed, to make such disasters impossible; but in this case the lawyers’ error meant, firstly, that the poet would be able to borrow money using Newstead as security, and secondly, that he would be able to sell it, in 1817, in defiance of tradition, without legal difficulty, to pay off his debts – by the end of a single term at Cambridge, they totalled £1,000, and things deteriorated thereafter.

Byron protested over and over again his determination *not* to sell Newstead. To his lawyer, John Hanson, he wrote from Athens, in the midst of the Mediterranean tour which produced *Childe Harold*:

Dear Sir,

Yours arrived on the first Ins^t. it tells me I am ruined. – It is in the power of God, the Devil, and Man, to make me poor and miserable, but neither the second nor third shall make me sell Newstead, and by the aid of the first I will persevere in this resolution. – My “father’s house shall not be made a den of thieves.”⁴ – Newstead shall not be sold.⁵

2: Beckett 44.

3: *N&Q* 8, no. 192 (July 2nd 1853), 2; quoted Beckett 81, n67, for which see Beckett 308.

4: Biblical; Matthew 21:13.

And to his best friend, John Cam Hobhouse, in the same month:

Letters I have had, yours of Cagliari; and two billets from Hanson, he wants me to sell Newstead, but I wont, and pray repeat my negative as strongly as possible. -- My affairs are greatly embarrassed, & I see no prospect of their ever being better, but I will <sell> {not sell} my abbey for man or the Devil.⁶

Yet less than two years later, on August 14th 1812, by which time Byron had been back in England from his tour of southern Europe for a year, Hobhouse records in his diary:

Went to Garroway's Coffee House to the sale of Newstead Abbey by auction by a Mr Farebrother -- where having first secured myself with Byron, I bid twelve times and left off at 113,000 guineas -- for the large lot -- which was brought in at 115,000 guineas -- Byron having fixed £120,000 as the price. The second was brought in at 13000 guineas. Never having done the like before, I was, before the thing began, in a complete fever -- but was told by Hanson, Byron's solicitor, that I came off most admirably -- I had just then only one pound one shilling and sixpence in the world.⁷

Here is the evidence we have to reconstruct the last visit which Hobhouse took to Newstead Abbey in Byron's lifetime. The trip had occurred two months before the abortive sale of August 1812:

Thursday June 4th (1812): Set out with Byron and Captain George Byron, his heir, to Newstead -- slept at Market Harborough.

Friday June 5th: Arrived at Newstead -----

Saturday June 6th: At Newstead -- took sweating walk --

Sunday June 7th: At Newstead ---

5: Byron to John Hanson, from Athens, November 11th 1810: text from B.L.Egerton 2611 ff.214-15; BLJ II 25.

6: Byron to John Cam Hobhouse, from Athens, November 26th 1810: text from NLS Ms.43438 f.20; BLJ II 27-31.

7: B.L.Add.Mss. 56530.

bottle of ale”,⁹ while the Abbey servants celebrated without him. Five hundred local people attended the party, an ox was roasted, six sheep consumed, and six hogsheads of ale and 150 gallons of punch drunk.

To visit Newstead frequently would imply it to be his home, and Byron and the concept of Home did not coexist happily. As with relationships – he was only happy in relationships involving homosexuality, adultery, or incest, where commitment was impossible – so with home.

When he tried to set up a real home in 1815 – with wife and future family, at 13 Piccadilly Terrace, London – he avoided paying the rent, for that, too, would imply commitment, and Byron was always passing through on his way to somewhere else – somewhere else undefined. One reason why he left England in 1809¹⁰ was because he had sired a child on one of the Newstead serving-girls,¹¹ and Byron would have been very unhappy indeed living in a country where evidence existed that he was an adult – evidence which Newstead would have provided.

Byron, not having grown up at Newstead, was under disadvantages from which a “normal” heir would not have suffered. He knew nothing of the estate when he inherited it, he was not intimate with the tenant-farmers, and he had not witnessed the day-to-day running of the place at the knee either of an experienced and benevolent father, or at that of a professional estate-manager. The state of the place, while Byron lived elsewhere – that is, for most of the time – is summed up in a letter his mother wrote to John Hanson:

I have not seen Newstead myself but I must inform you that almost every Person I meet informs me of the shameful state it is in, all the county talks of it and says its quite a disgrace for any Person in the character of a *Gentleman* to keep a place in such a *Beastly* state (that was the expression that was used). The *new* windows in the long dining room have *disappeared* so I am told but all that must be looked after before his Lordship leaves the place.¹²

When after the publication of *Childe Harold* he became London’s darling, Byron (self-conscious in that role), went to Newstead to avoid book-launches. From January 17th to February 6th, 1814, he was at Newstead with Augusta,

9: BLJ X 52; quoted Moore’s *Life* (1830) I 158; quoted Beckett (116 n2) as “Boyes, *My Amiable Mamma* 145”.

10: The question asked in Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia*.

11: See Ralph Lloyd-Jones, *Paphian Girls and Hyacinths: Byron’s Servant Relationships*, in Cochran (ed.), *Byron and Women [and Men]* CSP 2010, pp.147-60.

12: B.L.Egerton 2611, quoted Langley Moore, *Lord Byron Accounts Rendered* 81; Boyes, *My Amiable Mamma*, 134.

and missed the launch of *The Corsair* (in August he was in Hastings with Augusta when *Lara*, sequel to *The Corsair*, was launched). The last time he visited Newstead was in September, 1814: his last letter from the Abbey is dated September 7th 1814. He never took his wife there – she first visited it, incognito, years after they separated.

One woman in Byron's life is associated with Newstead, and with Newstead alone. This is Susan Vaughan, a Welsh maid-servant with whom he was involved at the end of 1811 and the start of 1812. Susan seems to have awoken no little passion in the twenty-three-year-old Lord, and we have a number of her letters to him, including this description of his twenty-fourth birthday party (at which he was not present, any more than he had been at his twenty-first). The letter gives an excellent impression of convivial life at Newstead. Susan uses commas as apostrophes, and often begins a new line with a capital letter, so I have kept her lineation:

I will not Say any more –
Filling my letter about those Celebrated Characters
About Newstead Abbey, only just to inform
My Affectionate friend what his little witch –
Having done the honor to his birth day which
Is as follows.) – on Tuesday I was rambling all over
The garden and woods around the house, gathering
Ground lyy and all other green branch or pretty
Sprig to dress the stone parlour with where we
ment to keep your birth day and not forgetting
Mine) if you my Dearest friend knew how Proud
I was and Still more happy when I thought of both –
being on <the/>one day. – but to tell you my ever dearest
How very gay I made the room with Hanging the
Long Ivy Carelessly all round the Parlour in drapings
It hung very pretty – and very <Tasty> {Tasty} done all about

here

Said it was <done>). the walls where scarsely seen
for green branches Hanging loosely over them and
The Pillar which stands in the middle, was dressd
exactly like jack in the green with every green
leaf and sprig I Could find I assure you it really
Lookd very nice and gay and also to Compleat

It well I wrote an invitation to Mrs Fletcher¹³ and
 One to Lucy¹⁴ one to Robert¹⁵ one to Mary¹⁶ and one to
 Spero¹⁷ and Bessy¹⁸
 Requesting the favor of their Companys to tea and Supper¹⁹
 Dont laugh when Taffy²⁰ tells what she thought would
 Suit their palates I forgot they all wrote me a
 Note in Answer to mine which I shall keep to
 Show you when you return to me). discription of the
 Dresses – all the pure Virgins was in white two in
 Particular Shining out to see which cut the dash
 In gold Chains Now Laugh again, when I tell you
 how spitefully I look,d at Lucy,s, and she at mine
 I like me own best not a straw for hers Mrs F
 And children was dressed to the tip of the moode) Mr
 Murry²¹ in a Cock,d hat lookd like the beadle of a
Parish – but now in reallity they all Honord the
 day very much indeed in respects to dress the first
 go was taffy ready to receive the Company) the next
 go was tea And Coffee if you please after that was
 Cleared away, Mr Murry sang a very pretty song of the
 Sort, then Mrs F done the same pretty well Bessy being
 Next was under the necessity of singing something, so it
 was to Lucy being the next neighbour I believe she just
 thought of it then – Saying Lucy Lucy raise your voice and
 This night lets all Rejoice, all be happy all bee gay
 Byron,s and Susan,s natal day – Very good – Lucy Sang your
 Song Robert would Say nought about it not even my
 Health). but did squeeze out your my dearest friend – which

pleased me

Best, after that they begd taffy would
Dance for them nor indeed could I refuse when I thought
 of you and that was all the while. My part end,d and
 three Virgins had a Reel, then it was Supper time
 the Cloath was laid in great stile believe me

13: Wife to William Fletcher, Byron's valet, who is with him in London.

14: Lucy or Lucinda, presumed mother of Byron's son.

15: Robert Rushton, Byron's page.

16: Mary, otherwise unidentified servant.

17: Spiro Saracci, one of Byron's two Greek servants.

18: Bessy, another otherwise unidentified servant.

19: Notice that Owen Mealey, the estate-manager, is not invited.

20: "Taffy" is Byron's pet-name for Susan.

21: Joe Murray, head servant at Newstead. Byron wanted to be buried with him, and with Bosun, his favourite dog.

I had a spare rib of pork at the top an apple pie at the bottom a pork pie in the middle potatoes at one corner sellery at the other mince pies and Custards at the other two Corners after that cheese and the Cloath was removed a small table set Round with glasses and punch we had forsooth Mr Murry Drank your health wishing you many happy returns of the Day – three Cheers follow,d in the next glass {little} I the

same

They afterwards asked me to give a toast I immediately Thought of you paused a moment, and rose up with My fine toast it was the following) Long may me Lord live happy may he be blest with Content & From Misfortune free. – The others Sanction,d It Said The Same I did not tell you of a nice plum cake we had more singing and dancing ended this grandure, the Company dispers'd, and I find most Pleasure in writing to you my dearest friend pray write as Soon as you can and tell me what your opinion is of all my Noncensical tales. I am afraid you will be Angry at them. god bless you my dear Lord Byron the Clock is now striking five Thursday morning no Sleep to night shall long for an answer to this Letter ...²²

It is very sad that the subject of all this celebration did not attend (he was in London). Susan's talk of "virgins" is a jest: Byron had been to bed with her and Lucy, at least, and who knows whether it was Mary or Bessy whom Hobhouse was to remunerate with 11s 5d later in the year?

The big shock for Byron came soon after this letter, when he discovered that Susan had seduced Robert Rushton, his page. We shall never know what Rushton's relationship with Byron was. Lady Caroline Lamb later claimed that Byron had debauched Rushton: if he had, it does not seem to have affected Rushton's sexual orientation. The knowledge that his mistress had bedded a young man he favoured devastated Byron, just as Shakespeare was devastated when the Dark Lady bedded the Fair Young Man ("Two loves have I, of comfort and despair ...").

To Francis Hodgson Byron wrote, “I can’t blame the girl, but my own vanity in believing that ‘such a thing as I am’ could be loved”;²³ and the pain of the realisation may have occasioned the frequency in his poems (*The Giaour, The Corsair, The Bride of Abydos ...*), of triangular tragedies, and of triangular comedies (*Don Juan, Beppo*). Rushton received a sad, quasi-paternal rebuke: but Susan Vaughan was dismissed.

At the 1812 auction, no-one had been quite interested enough in Newstead to go to Byron’s price for it. But 115,000 guineas would have settled all his debts, paid Hanson, and left enough for Byron to invest and live on. In the final upshot, Newstead was to be sold for the substantially smaller sum of £94,500.

The morning after the attempted auction, Byron received an offer for Newstead which stood at £140,000 – about £20,000 *more* than the unsuccessful bid on the previous day, and £45,500 *more* than what he would eventually make on the property! (In fact, £140,000 was an unrealistic price.) It *seemed* his troubles were over; but if anything in his life might teach him that human expectations were doomed always to be answered by anti-climax and long-drawn-out disappointment, it was this boost to his hopes: for the bidder was a Lancashire lawyer called Thomas Claughton, who hovered, as a Nemesis, around the poet’s life for the next six Years of Fame, rendering it a morass of alternating doubt, confidence, uncertainty, hope and despair.

For much of these years, it wasn’t even clear *who* owned Newstead Abbey – at one point, Claughton and Byron even resided there together. Claughton was a property-speculator. He *may* have been so confident because he anticipated a rise in land prices as soon as the war was over and government stocks fell. He *may* have been interested in Newstead’s coal-mining potential. Alas, we have no documents which enable us to read his mind: he may just have been short-sighted and incompetent; though his behaviour seems to indicate he knew what he *trying* to be about.

Those tenant farmers who knew Byron welcomed him back whenever he did visit, contrasting his patriarchal ways with those of the cold and cash-nexus-bound Claughton. To one farmer he said, getting out of his boat and shaking him by the hand, “Beardall you are one of the oldest friends I’ve got”.²⁴ It

23: *Books and Manuscripts from the English Library of Archibald, 5th Earl of Rosebery and Midlothian, K.G., K.T.*, Sotheby’s, London, 29 October 2009, lot 19; quoted by kind permission.

24: Quoted Beckett 182.

makes him sound like a charming version of Michael Henchard, and Claughton a charmless version of Donald Farfrae, from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. But Byron did not bury himself on his manor, and did not turn into a bearded, misanthropic hermit as he had told Thomas Moore he would.²⁵ He only stayed a month, and left on September 21st 1814: for it was while he was Newstead that he received Annabella Milbanke's acceptance of his marriage proposal. He never saw Newstead again.

The wretched tale of his pre-exilic finances shows a fatal passivity on Byron's part, and, as far as Newstead goes, a fatal lack of conviction – even of interest – in his role as a landed aristocrat. As John Beckett writes, “Byron's touching faith in Claughton was much like his touching faith in Hanson”.²⁶ To this we could add, “... and much like his touching faith in Sir Ralph Milbanke”, or, “... much like his touching faith in the literary judgement of the myopic William Gifford,” or, “... much like the faith of some of his Newstead tenants in him”. He was an insecure amateur, squashed between professional sluggards and incompetents. Only one person seems to have been concerned about his indifference to his feudal duties – his friend and confidante Lady Melbourne, herself a keen and conscientious estate-improver. On February 2nd 1814 she wrote to him:

I approve of your plan about Rochdale, & very much agree with your Agent, for really in your Situation it would be very improvident, to sell every bit of landed property, for although you may determine to live abroad how can you be certain y^t you shall always adhere to such a resolution, & even if you were for the present, – who knows what views you may have hereafter, – you may marry & have a Son & then you would regret his succeeding to the Peerage & having no property except Money – in this Country where Land gives so much more influence. – I have no doubt that M^r H. was right in advising you to sell N– because paying one's {debts} & obtaining a Sufficient / Sufficient Income are objects that should be accomplish'd, – but after that selling more, is only what short sighted persons would do; for though you get more income at y^e moment you lose great advantages, nobody so young as you are, can know y^e resources of a landed Estate, or the

25: Byron to Moore, from Hastings, August 3rd 1814; BLJ IV 151-3.

26: Beckett 189.

improvements that may be made by good management – I should suppose that besides laying out money upon opening a Colliery, or a LeadMine and what ever it may be that you have in View at R. that there must be several parts of the Estate where you might plant with great advantage – that to me seems the surest means of obtaining a large profit at a Small comparative expence – it is Nonsense what people say commonly, y^t you Plant for your Grandchildren, a Small Sum of money laid out yearly if done in proper Soil and Situation will make a much greater return than is generally supposed many Sorts of Timber as extremely Valuable of 20 Y^{rs} growth or even less, – since they have now discover'd the use of different kinds of Wood which formerly were reckon'd [*Ms. tear: "worthless"??*] forbearing – I am aware how very much this answer must bore you & therefore I shall not add to the length of it by saying any thing upon other Subjects ...²⁷

Lady Melbourne's is the only surviving voice raised against Byron's neglect, and final disposal, of Newstead Abbey: I find none of his peers raising eyebrows, and assume silent jealousy to be the cause – how many of *them* wished they could sell *their* ancestral seats!

The Newstead tale terminates happily – happily, that is, given the circumstances and personalities involved. A truly happy ending would have Byron holding on to his inheritance through thick and thin, going to Greece, surviving the War of Independence in triumph, and returning to England in the early 1830s, to a well-deserved retirement on his Nottinghamshire estate, and to finish *Don Juan*. Instead, in December 1817 Colonel Thomas Wildman put in a bid for Newstead (all 3,226 acres of it) for £94,500, and was accepted. In fact the trustees eventually received £97,972. Byron heard about the successful sale on December 11th 1817,²⁸ and signed the deeds on November 11th 1818 – the day he sent *Don Juan* Canto I to England.²⁹ Wildman acquired Newstead formally in February 1819.

Byron was pleased that Wildman was to take over the running of Newstead, for Wildman was not just a veteran of Waterloo (he had been *aide-de-camp* to Uxbridge), but an ex-Harrovia to boot. The Abbey in its present state owes much to his improvements, and to the twentieth-century work of Nottingham

27: Lady Melbourne to Byron, February 2nd 1814; (text from NLS Ms.43472; unpublished).

28: BLJ V 277-9.

29: BLJ VI 76-8. It seems on this occasion to have been either Hanson *père* or Hanson *filis* who told him that "Bob" Southey had been spreading rumours about him, and his "League of Incest" with Shelley, Mary Godwin, and Claire Clairmont.

City Council, its present owners. Byron would not have recognised its interior – whether he would have been ashamed at the implicit rebuke of his own indifference and neglect is a matter for speculation.

Under Wildman, Newstead thrived. Wildman was what the place had always needed: a resident owner, who believed in it, and in his own role in relation to it. He rationalised the estate, built new stone farmhouses (according to Washington Irving, at least), and gave everyone a new sense of security. He secured Joe Murray's place – just in time, for Joe Murray, Byron's most faithful retainer, after Fletcher, died in 1820. Not least important, though least-hymned of Wildman's deeds, was the decision to install water-closets in the Abbey itself: and the remainder of his committed restoration work – £100,000 worth – is with us today.³⁰ After Byron's death the Abbey became a shrine to his memory – with what justice, no-one asked, any more than they asked with what justice he was buried in the family vault of an estate which he had sold. Wildman was happy to encourage such meta-historical fantasies.

One point which will be forever undecided is this: was Wildman encouraged in his renovations by Byron's description of "Norman Abbey" in *Don Juan* Canto XIII? Or was Byron, hearing about the excellent work Wildman was doing there, anxious to give him a parallel dream to emulate when he wrote, for instance,

A glorious remnant of the Gothic Pile
 (While yet the Church was Rome's) stood half-apart
In a grand Arch which once screened many an aisle;
 These last had disappeared – a loss to Art;
The first yet frowned superbly o'er the Soil,
 And kindled feelings in the roughest heart
Which mourned the power of Time's or Tempest's march,
In gazing on that venerable Arch. –

Within a niche, nigh to its pinnacle,
 Twelve Saints had once stood sanctified in Stone –
But these had fall'n – not when the Friars fell,
 But in the war which struck Charles from his throne –
When each house was a fortalice, as tell
 The annals of full many a line undone –
The Gallant Cavaliers – who fought in vain
For those who knew not to resign, or reign.

³⁰: Except for the recently-stolen (2011) lead drainpipes.

But in a higher niche, alone, but crowned,
The Virgin Mother of the God-born child,
With her Son in her blessed arms, looked round,
Spared by some chance when all beside was spoiled;
She made the Earth below seem holy ground;
This may be Superstition weak or wild,
But even the faintest relic of a Shrine
Of any worship wakes some thoughts divine. (*Don Juan* XIII,

Sts.59-61)

It is “Superstition, weak or wild”, for Newstead was never as beautiful as this – the Newstead Cavaliers were never Gallant,³¹ and the faceless statue of the Virgin, what’s left of it, has I think never possessed the charm to inspire this degree of reverence – not since the Civil War. Norman Abbey in *Don Juan* is as much a fantasy-Newstead as the “vast and venerable pile” of *Childe Harold*, with its Paphian girls, singing and smiling as the Nottinghamshire females never did (except, as Susan reports, on Byron’s birthday). Byron perpetrates falsehoods upon Newstead Abbey in poetry with the same insouciance as he betrayed it in real life. Colonel Wildman, and subsequent generations, down to the present, have attempted to atone for him.

³¹: Sir John Byron was a Royalist general who went abroad with Charles II, having been ennobled by him in 1643. Eleanor, his wife, was said by Pepys and others to have been the Merry Monarch’s seventeenth mistress.