

Why a Byron Centre in Messolonghi?

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During the last ten years, or so, the world's Byron movement—as I like to call that special cultural and new activity that Elma Dangerfield launched in 1973—was marked by three significant events: first, the establishment of the Byron Collection in the University of Delaware; second, the founding of a Byron Lectureship in the University of Nottingham; and third, the founding of the Byron Research Centre and Philhellenism Library in Messolonghi.

I regret being unable to say anything at all about the Nottingham Lectureship since I haven't met or heard its current holder; we all heard Marsha's fine account of the Delaware Collection and appreciated it; and I must now say a few things about the place we have found ourselves in, this morning—May 18, 2004—in the Sacred Town of Messolonghi.

When I first learned about the events in Nottingham and Delaware, a relevant thought crossed my mind: we had a venue naturally related to Lord Byron as a resident and peer of Nottinghamshire; we had a second one in the country where Byron's fame and cult spread soon and grew rapidly; and we could add a third one, Messolonghi, where the drama of his life climaxed in a way that made positive the final assessment of the wrongs and rights of his short but adventurous life

Not surprising at all, Rosa Florou found my idea sound and appealing, so that two years ago we mentioned to a local and festive audience here that those three sites of Byron interest could be mentally linked by an imaginary line drawn from Nottingham, extending to Newark, and then turning south to end up in Messolonghi. In my mind, a huge triangle had been formed, a triangle big enough to contain Byron's fame in our days, a triangle as well known as the 'Bermuda Triangle,' but, assuredly, much less ominous and notorious.

Rosa's initial efforts concentrated on securing a proper home for the Messolonghi Centre in its natural location, that is, the recently erected Byron House in the new and uncrowded part of Messolonghi. It was not an easy goal to achieve despite the logic and rightness that dictated it. The Byron House had been built by Greece's Government, after the initiative of George Livanos, a Cabinet Member of local origin. According to state law, the Government then donated the building to the town's municipal authorities to use it as they saw fit, assuming, of course, that the Messolonghi Byron Society, presided by Rosa Florou, would be a rightful tenant in it. They had assumed wrongly because they had not taken into consideration what *envy* could think against that move, and how logic and justice could be easily overcome by hostile passion.

Costas Repassos, the then Mayor of Messolonghi, was eventually persuaded by Rosa to put her request for office space for discussion at a regular meeting of the Municipal Council. A number of council members, representing all political parties constituting that body, were so envious of the reputation and prestige that were associated with the activities of the Byron Society, that they defied the positive recommendation of the Mayor and the honest pleas of

Rosa—who was permitted to have her say—and decided by majority vote against allowing a “private club” to be housed in a publicly-owned building.

Well, they also remarked that they might allow the local Bryon Society to have some space in it, provided they, the Council, that is, would be given the property of the Centre, its legal custody and absolute administration, as it would have become public rather than private. Needless to mention how strongly Rosa and I protested that wrong decision and unreasonable demand, trying to explain that cultural and academic things had nothing to do with municipal politics and the general population of the town. The local “lords” were adamant in their attitude, and the only thing left for Rosa to do was to look for another location, even in a private home.

But the ‘Wheel of Fate’ soon turned in our favour. The Nomarch (Prefect, or Governor) of Actolia and Acarnania, the district that includes Messolonghi, Dimitrios, Stamatis, offered Rosa enough space in the upper floor of the old prefecture, where the untiring Rosa and her few helpers moved all belongings of the envisaged Centre as soon as circumstances permitted. Donated furniture, books and periodicals, a computer, a refrigerator, archives, pictures, posters, art works and the like found their way into the two pretty rooms of the old building. That was the venue inaugurated on 13th October 2001 in front of a huge and enthusiastic crowd of Messolonghiots and friendly visitors. Later in the evening, Peter Graham delivered the keynote lecture before the local dignitaries and noted visitors from Athens and elsewhere. Eventually Professor Graham accepted to be the first Academic Director of the Centre, whereas Lord Lytton and several noted academics from Britain, USA, and Greece accepted honorary positions on its Board of Directors. It was that Centre that organized the First International Student Byron Conference, in June 2002; and the two major universities of Virginia promised to have it electronically connected to their Byronic collections. One must honor here the good will and support by professors McGann and Graham.

In October 2002, the ‘Wheel of Fortune’ took a second positive turn favouring the Byron Society: the municipal elections brought to Messolonghi’s mayoralty George Prevezanos—a retired Air Force General—and his party who were staunch supporters of the Byron movement and its energetic leader, Rosa Florou. Thus, by the end of that year the Messolonghi Byron Centre had moved to its proper location right where you are gathered today. That new location became the venue of the Second International Byron Student Conference in June 2003. Both were very successful.

In January 2004, Rosa Florou and the Messolonghi Byron Research Centre welcomed the important visitors who came to its official opening ceremony, including the British Ambassador, Sir David Madden, and several noted academics and statesmen. Gifts of books and other Byroniana came from John Clubbe, Peter Graham, Charles Robinson, Jerome McGann, Joseph B. Yount, John Drummond Bone, David Brewer, myself, and others so that today, the Centre can boast of over 500 volumes of precious Bryon studies and items of related interest. To boot, promises for more gifts were made, and one of the most generous was from Australia’s Jacqueline Voignier-Marshall.

Our specialty and profession is an academic discipline; as such, it requires the involvement of our intellect—our mental gifts and special skills—in order to function

successfully and achieve worthy ends. So, students and teachers can come to this Centre and work intellectually to achieve their desired goals, training, and improvement as scholars. And as soon as Professor McGann's major bibliographical project (with electronic computation) materializes, any researcher here will be in a position to obtain information from the greatest research centres in the world within 20 minutes! Now, this is a great honor for good, old, Messolonghi, the formerly small fishing town with its poor fishermen in period breeches, like Byron's Greek boatman shown in old photographs.

Those of us who have aged in the profession of teaching literature know one big truth: you cannot teach well and inspire your students if you try to function ONLY as an intellectual. You need to get one more side of yourself in this activity as well: you need to involve your emotional dimension. Only this way your teaching acquires both needed qualities and becomes multifaceted, enriched, challenging, inspiring, and, above all, *alive*—having a soul of its own, stemming from your own soul.

I remember the famous Harvard comparatist, Harry Levine, who liked to narrate a dream he would have every time he was about to attend a significant academic function in the field of Comparative Literature. In that dream—or, rather, nightmare—he was sitting in the basement of his house, when he heard a knock at the door, and as he opened it, two big men in overalls and holding plumbers' tools boldly stepped into his den. "What do you want here?" asked Levine. The men answered, "We have come to *compare* the literature!", as if they were about to do a causal measurement of water flow in a main.

By means of this anecdote, that refined gentleman wanted to impress on his audience that dealing with literature was not a technical or scientific activity based on one's savvy and manual skills; it was an activity that required some other gift as well: inspiration, the breathing of life into a body of knowledge and thus animate it. Literature does not deserve to be dissected in a laboratory; to be put under a microscope, to be anatomized; as something alive, if you treat it that way, it will die. Remember the end of Keats's "Lamia."

To become inspired we need motivation; we need incitement. As we sit here and look at the placid lagoon, our tensions are eased and our mind clears. And as we look at the Garden of Heroes and the monuments to Byron and to other freedom martyrs, Greek and foreign, our emotional world becomes activated. Our intellect and our soul begin to act together and to become *one*. As George Seferis recorded in his celebrated poem "The Kind of Asine"—in my free paraphrase and adjustment of his thought—we may think that we have probably walked in an alley where Byron walked 180 years ago; we have probably touched a rock, or a broken column, where he sat to rest after a day's action; and, most certainly, we have breathed the same salty sea breeze that cooled him as he breathed it in 1824, as he was determined to see that liberation war to its positive conclusion. Perhaps we come to feel and to think like he did when he sat down to write his last and confessional birthday poem, "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-sixth Year," in January 1824. I know of at least two persons of a Byronists' group who were inspired to write relevant lyrics in Messolonghi.

Our trip to Messolonghi on an academic errand may actually become a regular pilgrimage to a very special place and for a rather uncommon goal: seeking academic truth, we

end up discovering our true self. Suddenly an epiphany comes to us, and we feel the surge of feelings and thoughts that must find a way out of our inner being and take form and substance as a contribution, an original and worthy contribution, of our very self to the challenging and unending celebration of the Byronic phenomenon. And our contribution is bound to the honest and pure, because it comes first-hand straight to us with minimal interference by others.

The ‘spirit of the place’—as Lawrence Durrell liked to call the *spiritus loci*, or *dues loci* of enchanted locations of Greece, mythic or real, has worked on us, and our soul pours out into the project conceived first by our intellect. Thus our findings will be integrated and of true value; and our human being will have moved toward a more perfect plenitude.

To make a long story short, that’s why a Byron Centre has to exist in Messolonghi. Thank you.