

THE ANGLO-HELLENIC REVIEW

No 41 Spring 2010 Published by the Anglo-Hellenic League £2.50 (UK)

TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY ISSUE



Detail of John Craxton's *Shepherds Near Knossos* (1947). Photograph: Jonathan Clark Fine Art

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BOOK REVIEWS

Byron Conference in Greece

September 2009

Roderick Beaton

To mark the 200th anniversary of Byron's first arrival in Greece, in September 1809, the 35th International Byron Conference was held from 6-13 September in Athens and Messolonghi. A co-production between the Messolonghi Byron Society and the University of Athens, its theme was 'Lord Byron and History.'

It began with an Honorary Degree ceremony for the doyen of Byron studies, Professor Jerome McGann, in the Great Hall of Athens University, in the neoclassical splendour of its original building on Panepistimiou Street in central Athens. The opening keynote address was given by William St Clair, whose classic study of the philhellenes in the Greek War of Independence, *That Greece Might Still be Free*, has recently been reissued (see review, p.29). St Clair's topic was 'Viewing the Acropolis in the Age of Lord Byron', and he invited us to think about the way the mindset of different viewers, at different historical periods, has determined the way in which one of the world's greatest monuments has been seen and understood.

There followed an engaging one-man theatrical performance, mounted by drama students from Richard Stockton College of New Jersey. Here we saw a convincingly young, and limping, Lord Byron, dressed not in Souliot war-gear but an informal dressing gown, such as he might have worn in the privacy of the Capuchin Convent in Plaka, in 1810, and reading from letters written while there. All this took place in the august ceremonial setting of the Old Parliament chamber in Athens, in the presence of Byron's 'Homeric' helmet and other relics. The helmet was one of three made for Byron in Genoa on the eve of his departure to fight for Greece in the War of Independence, in the summer of 1823. Auctioned after his death, it was bought by the American philhellene Samuel Gridley Howe and spent a century in Boston, before being returned to Athens by his descendant in the 1920s.

An additional treat for delegates was a specially organised visit to the new Acropolis Museum, which certainly lives up to the account of it by Paul Cartledge in the last issue of the *Review*. We saw the plaster casts of the Parthenon sculptures, interspersed with the few originals in the possession of the Museum, a juxtaposition that has a particular frisson for Byronists, given the poet's powerful attack on Lord Elgin's depredations in the second canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* and 'The Curse of Minerva'.

Visit to Messolonghi

The remainder of the conference decamped to western Greece, to Messolonghi, where Byron died on 19 April 1824. The journey, that could take more than a week in Byron's time, is now a mere three hours, thanks to the spectacular Charilaos Trikoupis suspension bridge, that since 2004 has spanned the entrance to the Gulf of Corinth, between Rio and Antirrio. Messolonghi was by all accounts a bit of a backwater when Byron's boat reached its harbour on 3 January 1824; it still is today, though greatly changed in appearance. And fortunately, we were spared the torrential rains that may have contributed to Byron's decline and death from fever. The shoreline has been extended, during the last

century, out into the lagoon, so the site of the large three-storey house on the waterfront, where Byron lived and died, shown in prints of the period, now lies some way inland. Very few buildings in Messolonghi are still standing from that time: almost exactly two years after Byron's death, the town was retaken by the Turks, when most of the inhabitants perished in the 'Exodus' that is still commemorated as one of the most heroic events of the Greek War of Independence.

On the eve of the Exodus, on 10 April 1826, the 'Byron' house was blown up by its owner, Christos Kapsalis, along with himself and four hundred citizens too weak to attempt to fight their way to freedom. But thanks to the Municipality and the Messolonghi Byron Society it has recently been rebuilt, as a replica, on reclaimed land about a hundred metres from its original position. On its top floor, where Byron's own rooms would have been in the original building, a permanent exhibition has been lovingly put together, with photographs, engravings, costumes, and books. Since 2001 this has been home to the new Messolonghi Byron Research Centre, which welcomes university students and visiting scholars. (For information, go to <http://www.messolonghibyronsociety.gr/>)

Messolonghi was also where the bulk of the academic papers were given, and the attendant discussions took place. There were just over 60 papers, in parallel sessions, covering a great many aspects of Byron's life and work. Not surprisingly, Byron's two journeys to Greece featured prominently, although by no means exclusively.

Conclusions? One thing on which I think most speakers were agreed, who touched on the subject, is that Byron's first experience of Greece between 1809 and 1811 was a formative one that did much to determine the rest of the course of his life. Rather less was said about his second visit, and the reasons for it. But a trio of papers (by Ekaterini Douka-Kabitolglou from Greece, Stephen Minta from England, and Young ok An from the USA) converged on the view that Byron was far from naïve politically, and must therefore have known pretty well what he was doing when he committed himself to the cause of Greek independence.

All three speakers took issue with Goethe's *bon mot* about Byron that 'when he begins to think, he is a child.' Byron's political thinking might not be 'joined-up', in today's terms, but perhaps so much the better for that. Byron appreciated the ebb and flow, the unpredictability, the lack of absolute truths, that postmodern views of history, too, have more recently been coming to terms with. As another speaker, Michael O'Neill, of Durham University, put it: history, for Byron, consists of a 'record of loss'. The poet saw history as performance, not as a 'process' whose course is in some way inevitable or laid down in advance. And so when he took ship for Greece – to his death, as it turned out – Byron knew the risks. But it was not a suicide mission, or an act born of despair, or a mere celebrity gesture.

Not all Byronists take such a sanguine view of their subject's intellectual powers, or probity. For others, he was capable of profound self-deception, and a culpable dishonesty towards others – including us, his future readers. Another aspect of history that figured largely at the conference was Byron's impact on different readers, at particular times and places around the world and across two centuries. It was particularly enlightening to hear how Byron's take on the Don Juan legend came to be revived and re-interpreted in South Africa under apartheid; how his life and opinions themselves became legendary in 19th-century Poland, Russia, in the southern Balkans – and of course in Greece. We also heard something of Byron's influence on music, with recorded performances of poems set by Beethoven's disciple, Ferdinand Ries, and an extempore live one, by Peter Cochran, of the haunting lyric, 'When I left thy shores, o Naxos.'

Whether Byron had ever seen the shores of Naxos, let alone left them, remains uncertain. But then, that was surely part of Byron's genius: to make up his life as he went along.