Hours of Idleness by Lord Byron
Commemorative Bi-Centenary Lecture
By Allan Gregory at the Blackrock Society, 8th October, 2007

Although Byron satirized Thomas Moore in English Bards and Scotch Reviewers, he had in fact been a lover of Moore's poetry since his exposure to the work in 1803, eight years before Samuel Rogers brought the two men together for the first time. In that year {1803), the fifteen- year old Byron eagerly pored over Moore's *The Poetical Works of Thomas Little, Esq.* {Thomas Moore's pseudonym}, which had been published in the summer of 1801. These lyrical poems are characterized by a playfully mischievous attitude toward love, sex, and romantic self-expression; many of the poems were considered to be daringly erotic, while pretending to be the product of the author's experience and passionate feelings. In Little's works, supposedly heartfelt declarations of love made to respectable women alternate with short lascivious poems like "To Phillis":

Phillis, you little rosy rake,
That heart of yours I long to rifle;
Come, give it me, and do not make
So much ado about *a trifle*!

Or, in another "Song", he asks:

"Oh! Why should Platonic control, love,
Enchain an emotion so free?
Your soul, though a very sweet soul, love,
Will ne'er be sufficient for me.

If you think, by this coolness and scorning,
To seem more angelic and bright,
Be an angel, my love, in the morning,
But oh! *be a woman to-night!"*

Byron's comment that before reading Thomas Little he was "without the smallest poetical propensity" suggests that Moore may well deserve at least some of the credit for awakening Byron's interest in poetry.

Between 1806 and 1808, while living in Southwell, a town in Nottinghamshire with about three thousand inhabitants, Byron published four juvenile books -two private and two public. This paper analyses the young Byron's ambitions for his early poetry; how, from the outset, he attempted to mythologise himself, and tried to construct an alternative reality; and how liberal he felt himself to be, first in

Southwell and then in the world at large, when both social and emotional influences forced him to think again about personal behaviour and proclivities.

{ *Last May,The Irish Byron Society paid a visit to Burgage Manor, Byron's home in Southwell, where many of the poems I am referring to here tonight, were written.}*

It would be neglectful to concentrate exclusively on the third and most famous of these publications, *Hours of Idleness*, without seeing it in the context of its two previous volumes, *Fugitive Pieces* and *Poems on Various Occasions*. *Fugitive Pieces* contains thirty-eight poems and was printed privately and, anonymously, by S. and J. Ridge of Newark and was ready for distribution in 1806. It contains seventeen heterosexual love poems, one {The Cornelian} almost overtly homosexual, one poem about Newstead Abbey, seven translations from Latin and Greek, four satirical poems of school and university life, six personal poems and two {*On the Death of Mr. Fox* and *An Occasional Prologue*} which fit into none of these categories.
The book represents various experiences of Byron's life in Southwell and Harrow, and printed, according to Byron, "for the perusal of a few friends to whom they are dedicated". We see him romanticising himself from the word go; fashioning a persona; presenting the amorous, haughty, skeptical young lord as an idealized version of himself to the world. All his male friends at Harrow are ennobled by heroic couplets and all his girlfriends at Southwell get semi-facetious song lyrics. While many of the poems are harmless and would have been instantly decoded by the people of Southwell, the heterosexual amatory pieces were the ones which landed Byron in trouble. Two and a half of the poems were, at the last minute, deemed by Byron, himself, to be unprintable, and are part of the reason why only four copies of the book survive. He recalled the entire print-run of one hundred {some say fifty} copies, and burned most of it. The two poems cut were "To Mary" and "To Caroline" and the latter half of "To Miss E.P." {E.P. meaning Elizabeth Pigott, Byron's amanuensis}. These poems seem to imply that Byron made love to at least two women at Southwell and in the case of "Mary" he suggests that he had, at the very least, been satiated with passion:

No more that bosom heaves for me,
On it another seeks repose,
Another riots on its snows,
Our bonds are broken, both are free.

No more with mutual love we burn,
No more the genial couch we press,
Dissolving in the fond caress;
Our love o'erthrown will ne'er return.

Though love than ours could ne'er be truer,
Yet flames too fierce themselves destroy,
Embraces oft repeated cloy,
Ours came *too* frequent, to endure.

Here, we see Byron boasting of his conquests and love affairs, or at least writing salaciously about them. This is perhaps a natural concomitant of his deep-seated insecurity resulting from his lameness; a feeling that he must demonstrate his physical capabilities despite his handicap, in the same way and for the same reasons that he vaunted his swimming exploits. It is also reasonable to assume that having twice been the victim of sexual abuse, once at nine and again at fifteen, his exploits with women served to cloud the humiliation he must have felt at these horrific experiences. Whatever the reason, the young ladies of Southwell were charmed and besotted by the amatory advances of the handsome young lord, and the possibility of being immortalized in one of his poems.

What is surprising about *Fugitive Pieces* is that only two poems were cut. When one considers all the blanks in the titles: To E-, To D-, To M.S.G.-, To M-, To M.S.G.- again; To Julia, To Marion, To Eliza, To Emma, To Ellen, To Woman, it appears that the eighteen-year-old Byron had had liaisons {of differing degrees and intensities} with at least nine women in Southwell., "a town", he wrote, "whose inhabitants are notorious for officious curiosity ". On being sent a copy of the book, a friend of Byron, the Reverend J.C. Becher, was anything but impressed and felt it necessary to express his profound distaste in verse:-

Say, Byron! Why compel me to deplore
Talents designed for choice poetic lore,
Deigning to varnish scenes that shun the day
With guilty lustre, and with amorous lay?
Forbear to taint the Virgin's spotless mind,
In Power though mighty, be in Mercy kind,
Bid the chaste Muse diffuse her hallowed light,
So shall thy Page enkindle pure delight,
Enhance thy native worth, and proudly twine,
With Britain's honours, those that are divine.

Byron never forgot this reprimand from the Reverend Becher; although he was certainly aware at the time, of the impact his verses could have as he wrote to his friend John Pigott, that he would "perceive them…to be improper for the perusal of ladies", and warned him that "none of the females in your family must see them".

It was probably on the grounds of flippancy and blasphemy that the lively end section of the poem to Elizabeth Pigott was omitted; in this poem Byron is considering the consternation which might arise in Paradise if husbands and wives, after death, were united again in the miseries of wedlock:

"Tis surely enough upon earth to be vex'd,
With wives who eternal confusion are spreading;
"But in Heaven" {so runs the Evangelist's Text,}
"We neither have giving in marriage or wedding."

From this we suppose, {as indeed well we may},
That should saints after death, with their spouses put up more,

And wives, as in life, aim at absolute sway,
All Heaven would ring with the conjugal uproar.

Distraction and discord would follow in course
Nor Matthew, nor Mark, nor St. Paul, can deny it,
The only expedient is general divorce,
To prevent universal disturbance and riot.

Byron exudes huge confidence in these lines of risky rhymes and risqué humour, and shows a precocious awareness of the dangers of early nineteenth-century sexual transactions. On the other hand, he clearly revelled in the small town scandals he was causing in Southwell, telling his old Harrow friend Edward Long that he had, in fact, been accused of seducing "no less than 14 Damsels, {including my mother's maids} besides sundry Matrons and Widows.
According to Fiona McCarthy in *Byron, Life and Legend*, it is possible that Byron, at this period, fathered an illegitimate son. Fugitive Pieces contains a sentimental six-stanza poem entitled "To My Son!" dated 1807. In this, unpublished, morally defiant little poem he acknowledges the child and promises lifelong support for him:

Those flaxen locks, those eyes of blue,
Bright as thy mother's in their hue;
Those rosy lips, whose dimples play
And smile to steal the heart away,
Recall a scene of former joy,
And touch thy father's heart, my Boy!

"Why, let the world unfeeling frown,
Must I fond Nature's claim disown?
Ah, no - though moralists reprove,
I hail thee, dearest child of love,
Fair cherub, pledge of youth and joy –
A Father guards thy birth, my Boy!

Thomas Moore, so often gullible about Byron's sexual exploits, accepts the poem as autobiographical: "it is not easy to suppose a poem, so full of natural tenderness, to have been indebted for its origin to imagination alone". Moore cites the story that Byron's mother had agreed to raise the child, but her generosity was never tested since the infant died soon after birth.

The international Byronist, Dr. Peter Cochran, notes that, on examination of the original text of *Fugitive Pieces,* as printed, in the Morgan library in New York, it is clearly the product of inadequate proof-reading, and is riddled with misprints. He also asserts that "the book's indecency may have been the ostensible motive for its withdrawal, but the banal fact of its unprofessional presentation, and the fact that it did not as yet embody Byron's final thoughts, may have been motives just as strong, though harder to boast about".

Confessing that a book is rude, raises a smile among your friends; confessing that it is incompetently printed does not. One can only conclude that Byron had been careless and impatient about his first book.

Byron' second volume, *Poems on Various Occasions*, contains forty-eight poems. It was privately and anonymously printed by S.& J. Ridge between December 23rd 1806 and 13th January, 1807. Byron wrote to John Pigott telling him that the volume is "vastly correct, & miraculously chaste". Names that might give offence in Southwell are altered- "Julia" becomes "Lesbia", for example. Love and Marriage are no longer subjects for mirth, as they were to be years later in *Beppo* and *Don Juan*. Of the new poems, one is on Newstead Abbey, six are love poems, two are translations from the Latin {one, a very short version of the Nisus and Euryalus episode from *Aeneid IX*, another celebration of male love} and three are personal. The poems are divided into three sections, the first with no heading, the second and third headed respectively "Translations and Imitations" and "Fugitive Pieces". Seventeen of these poems are not seen again; when putting his next book together- his first public book- Byron abandons them. In addition to its much more professional proof-reading, the printing of *Poems on Various Occasions* is far superior and virtually all the numerous italicizations which characterize *Fugitive Pieces*, have been removed.

One new poem offers an answer to the Southwell critics, particularly to the Reverend J.C. Becher, whom it quotes; Byron's title to this poem is amusing in itself because of its longwindedness: *ANSWER TO SOME ELEGANT VERSES SENT BY A FRIEND TO THE AUTHOR, COMPLAINING THAT ONE OF HIS DESCRIPTIONS WAS RATHER TOO WARMLY DRAWN.*

Candour compels me, Becher! To commend
The verse which blends the censor with the friend.
Your strong yet just reproof extorts applause
From me, the heedless and imprudent cause.
For this wild error which pervades my strain,
I sue for pardon, - must I sue in vain?
The wise sometimes from Wisdom's ways depart:
Can youth then hush the dictates of the heart?
Precepts of prudence curb, but can't control,
The fierce emotions of the flowing soul.

Oh! how I hate the nerveless, frigid song,
The ceaseless echo of the rhyming throng,
Whose labour'd lines in chilling numbers flow,
To paint a pang the author ne'er can know
The artless Helicon I boast is youth;-
My lyre, the heart; my muse, the simple truth.
Far be't for me, the "virgin mind" to "taint",
Seduction's dread, is here no slight restraint:
The maid, whose virgin breast is void of guile,

Whose wishes dimple in a modest smile;
Whose downcast eye disdains the wanton leer,
Firm in her virtue's strength, yet not severe;
She, whom a conscious grace shall thus refine,
Will ne'er be "tainted" by a strain of mine.
But, for the nymph, whose premature desires
Torment her bosom with unholy fires,
No net to snare her willing heart is spread,
She would have fallen, tho' she ne'er had read.

The *heterosexual* love interest is substantially less in *Poems on Various Occasions* than it had been in Fugitive Pieces. A major addition is *Childish Recollections*, which compensates for the loss of the earlier love poems. An implicit reason for their being omitted, is the eighteen-year old Byron's sexual predilections and a long period of what he terms as "depression of spirits". It appears, for the present, at least, that he's had enough of women:

Farewell! Ye nymphs, propitious to my verse,
Some other Damon, will your charms rehearse;
Some other paint his pangs, in hope of bliss,
Or dwell in rapture, on your nectar'd kiss,
Those beauties grateful to my ardent sight
No more entrance my senses in delight;
Those bosoms, form'd of animated snow,
Alike are tasteless and unfeeling now.
These to some happier lover I resign-
The memory of those joys alone is mine.
Censure no more shall brand my humble name,
The child of passion and the fool of fame.
Weary of love, of life, devour'd with spleen,
I rest a perfect Timon, not nineteen.

{Timon was the eponymous misanthrope from Athens, who lived in the second half of the 5th Century B.C. On account of the ingratitude and disappointments he believed himself to have suffered, he withdrew from society}.

Rather than celebrate, or regret, or joke about women, the new Byron, and indeed this is a new Byron, the Byron of *Poems on Various Occasions,* laments the passing of innocent boyhood love, particularly his friendship with John Fitzgibbon, second Earl of Clare, whose father, whom he succeeded in 1802, was for nearly twelve years, Lord Chancellor of Ireland. "I never" says Lord Byron, in 1821, hear the word "Clare", without a beating of the heart even now; and I write it with the {same} feelings of 1803-4-5 ad infinitem":

For ever to possess a friend in thee,
Was bliss, unhop'd, though not unsought by me;
Thy softer soul was form'd for love alone,
To ruder passions, and to hate unknown;
Thy mind, in union with thy beauteous form,
Was gentle but unfit to steer the storm;
That face, an index of celestial worth,
Proclaim'd a heart, abstracted from the earth.
Oft, when depress'd with sad foreboding gloom,
I sat reclin'd upon our favourite tomb,
I've seen those sympathetic eyes o'erflow
With kind compassion for thy comrade's woe
Or, when less mournful subjects form'd our themes,
We tried a thousand fond romantic schemes,
Oft hast thou sworn, in friendship's soothing tone,
Whatever wish was mine, must be thine own…

Childish Recollections is considered to be the most ambitious piece published in Byron's early poetry. The vulnerable nostalgia for schoolboy innocence which Byron displays in it, and in the Nisus and Euryalus translation, may also have been inspired in part by his new attachment to John Edleston, the Trinity choirboy. On July 5th, 1807, Byron wrote about Edleston to Elizabeth Pigott:

…I certainly love him more than any human being, & neither time or Distance have had the least effect on my {in general} changeable Disposition…

Poems on Various Occasions was printed, as Byron claimed, "merely for the perusal of a friendly Circle". So far, he had printed his works privately and anonymously. But in March, 1807, he announced:

"Contrary to my former intention, I am now preparing a volume for the Public at large, My amatory pieces will be expunged, and others substituted, in their place… This is a hazardous experiment, but want of better employment, the encouragement I have met with, & my own Vanity, induce me to stand the Test, though not with sundry palpitations. – The Book will circulate fast enough in this County, from mere Curiosity."

Hours of Idleness, a Series of Poems, Original and Translated contains thirty-nine poems and was published by Ridge- publicly, under Byron's name, in the final week of June, 1807. The book is divided into three sections as before, but shows a far greater diversion of subject matter: no longer is it an expression of Byron's relationship with Southwell. The love poems are down in number from seventeen in *Fugitive Pieces* to ten. There are two poems on Newstead Abbey; ten translations from Greek and Latin, including Byron's version of the Nisus and Euryalus episode; one Ossian imitation, which also celebrates male bonding; two poems on school and university; and the remainder either personal {though not erotic}or miscellaneous. *Childish Recollections* reappears- but slightly muted.

The Virgil translation, being of a classical writer, "most" of whose "songs are pure" as Byron puts it in *Don Juan,* must have been above suspicion in Southwell; but the male-for-male passion it celebrates remains intense; Byron told his Cambridge friend, Edward Noel Long, that it was "the best in point of Versification I have ever written":

"But thou, my generous youth, whose tender years
Are near my own, whose worth, my heart reveres,
Henceforth, affection sweetly thus begun
Shall join our bosoms, and our souls in one;
Without thy aid, no glory shall be mine,
Without thy dear advice, no great design;
Alike through life esteem'd, thou godlike boy,
In war my bulwark, and in peace my joy".

As I have already said, Byron is creating his own myth, and will continue to do so for the rest of his life. In the poem *On Leaving Newstead Abbey*: we are to believe that the Byrons were crusaders, and that four brothers of the family fell at the battle of Marston Moor, where the adherents of Charles 1 were defeated. Later, in the *Elegy on Newstead Abbey* he goes even further and says the place was besieged by parliamentarians during the Civil War. There is no evidence for any of these assertions. In *Lachin Y Gair* Byron toys with the idea that some of his ancestors died at the battle of Culloden while his prose note concedes that he doesn't really know:

Through thy battlements, Newstead, the hollow winds whistle;
Thou, the hall of my fathers, art gone to decay;
In thy once smiling garden, the hemlock and thistle
Have chok'd up the rose, which lay bloom'd in the way

On Marston, with Rupert, 'gainst traitors contending,
Four brothers enrich'd with their blood the bleak field;
For the rights of a monarch their country defending,
Till death their attachment to royalty seal'd.

Shades of heroes, farewell! Your descendant departing
From the seat of his ancestors, bids you adieu!
Abroad, or at home, your remembrance imparting
New courage, he'll think upon glory and you.

as Peter Cochran notes: both verse and prose cover the fact-readily ascertainable- that no matter how many *Gordons* died in the '45, the Byron's were, by then, comfortably going to seed in rural Nottinghamshire. We are all familiar with and are reminded constantly by various Byron biographers that "Tommy Moore loved a Lord". George Gordon, Lord Byron loved "being a Lord". In his preface to *Hours of Idleness,* Byron states rather condescendingly…"A considerable portion of these poems has been privately printed, at the request and for the perusal of my friends. I am sensible that the

partial, and, frequently, injudicious admiration of a social circle, is not the criterion on which poetic genius is to be estimated, yet, "to do greatly", we must "dare greatly." And I have hazarded my reputation and feelings in publishing this volume. "I have passed the Rubicon" and must stand or fall by the "cast of the die".
"The opinion of Dr. Johnson on the poems of a noble relation of mine, "That when a man of rank appeared in the character of an author, his merit should be handsomely acknowledged", can have little weight with verbal, and still less with periodical, censors; but were it otherwise, I should be loath to avail myself of the privilege, and would rather incur the bitterest censure of anonymous criticism, than triumph in honours granted solely by a title." This was Byron anticipating his critics; but no anticipation could have prepared him for the bitter censure of the Edinburgh Review which led, eventually, to the publication of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers.*

Hours of Idleness, despite the condescension of Henry Brougham who wrote the scurrilous riposte in the Edinburgh Review, is a book full of vigour and variety and without a dull line in the entire volume. It is an astonishing achievement for a nineteen-year old, and is, in fact, far more interesting than the juvenile works of Alexander Pope and John Cowley, by which Brougham measures it. One senses, on reading the volume, that Byron could go on forever, whether its with the satire on Cambridge in *Granta, A Medley,* which only stops because "The Reader's tired, and so am I "or because the poet's lexicon really has run out of rhymes as in *The Tear.*

In 1821, Byron wrote in his diary "My first dash into poetry was as early as 1800. It was the ebullition of a passion for my first cousin, Margaret Parker…one of the most beautiful of evanescent beings… I was then about twelve-she rather older, perhaps a year. She died about a year or two afterwards, in consequence of a fall, which injured her spine and induced consumption…I do not recollect scarcely any thing equal to the transparent beauty of my cousin, or to the sweetness of her temper, during the short period of our intimacy. She looked as if she had been made out of a rainbow-all beauty and peace. "On the Death of a Young Lady", {cousin to the author, and very dear to him}, is the opening poem in *Hours of Idleness*. Byron's note claims the indulgence of the reader," more for this piece, than any other in the collection, as it was written at an earlier period than the rest"; he was fourteen years old:

Hush'd are the winds, and still the evening gloom,
Not e'en a zephyr wanders through the grove,
Whilst I return to view my Margaret's tomb,
And scatter flowers on the dust I love.

Within this narrow cell reclines her clay,
That clay, where once such animation beam'd;
The King of Terrors seized her as his prey,
Not worth, nor beauty, have her life redeem'd.

Oh! could that King of Terrors pity feel,
Or Heaven reverse the dread decrees of fate!
Not here the mourner would his grief reveal,
Not here the muse her virtues would relate.

But wherefore weep? Her matchless spirit soars
Beyond where splendid shines the orb of day;
And weeping angels lead her to those bowers,
Where endless pleasures virtue's deeds repay

And shall presumptuous mortals Heaven arraign,
And, madly, godlike Providence accuse?
Ah! No, far fly from me attempts so vain; -
I'll ne'er submission to my God refuse.

Yet is remembrance of those virtues dear,
Yet fresh the memory of that beauteous face;
Still they call forth my warm affection's tear,
Still in my heart retain their wonted place.

May I conclude by saying that the frankness, confusion, fake, then genuine moral earnestness, and above all the sheer energetic delight in describing an abundance of social and amatory upheaval, as Byron does in *Hours of Idleness*, foreshadow everything we value in his later work.

Allan Gregory, April, 2007

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