

Byron's Southwell Dramatics

A Conference on the theme of 'Byron at the Theatre', especially one held at Nottingham Trent University, could not be considered complete without some reference to his local productions and performances. For instance, his attempts to involve the amateur talent of Southwell in the autumn of 1806 at the impressionable age of eighteen give us the first insight into this aspect of his life.

Byron's presence, along with his mother, caused quite a stir in this quiet Nottinghamshire town with its acknowledged higher than normal quota of parsons and old maids. Byron wrote in his diary for 1821:

When I was a youth, I was reckoned a good actor. Besides Harrow speeches, in which I shone, I enacted Penruddock in the 'Wheel of Fortune,' and Tristram Fickle, in the farce of 'The Weathercock,' for three nights, in some private theatricals at Southwell, in 1806, with great applause.

My Paper marks the 200th anniversary of Byron's joint productions and looks at the circumstances surrounding these events to give a further insight into Byron's life and times.

It must, however, be mentioned that on the evening prior to the 2007 Conference a special performance of Byron's play 'The Blues', more properly described as a Literary Eclogue, took place under the direction of Dr Peter Cochran, following a dinner at the Riverside Restaurant. It starred well-known Byronists Bernard Beatty as Inkel, Alan Gregory as Tracy, Shona Allan as Lady Bluebottle, with members of the Newstead Abbey and Irish Byron Societies and others taking the minor roles. Dr Cochran feels it may have been the first production ever of this work. This event, so well managed by Peter, had, I feel, many similarities to Byron's own production in 1806.

Clearly Byron took his project very seriously and was determined to show to the townsfolk just what he was capable of. It is thought that he had brought these two plays with him from London. He was faced with the problems of getting a cast together, as some who were considered accomplished performers would not take part and others were not bold enough to take up the challenge, remembering that modesty was considered a particular virtue in that community. We do have the benefit of the recollections of this event from the information supplied to John

Murray, after Byron's death by his confidante and friend Elizabeth Pigot, and also by his leading lady in both these plays, Mary Anne Bristoe. It is worth mentioning that both these ladies, a little older than Byron, never did manage to find husbands.

Byron also had trouble in finding a suitable venue to stage the plays. The 'public room' in Southwell chosen by Byron in the first instance was thought to be the new Assembly Rooms attached to the 'Saracen's Head'. This ancient and historic hostelry had the reputation of being the place where King Charles I had spent his last night of freedom. However this did not conform to the wishes of some female members and Miss Bristoe tells us that Mr Leacroft, another member of the cast, offered his dining room for the purpose. After some alterations she tells us that this room proved ideal as there were two adjacent rooms leading into the converted room which could be brought into use.

When all the arrangements were supposedly in place, Byron and Elizabeth Pigot's brother John set off for a two week stay in Harrogate, leaving the members of the cast to learn their lines and rehearse. Miss Bristoe writes that their rehearsals were always supervised and sanctioned by Mrs Holmes, who is described as a maiden lady, the daughter of a clergyman. She is also described as 'an agreeable and instructive companion, and possesses the esteems of all who had the pleasure of her acquaintance'. This is probably as well because it is difficult to imagine the effect it must have had on the rest of the cast who had to sort things out, while the leading actor and producer was over a hundred miles away! Pigot assured the actors in a letter to his sister whilst in Harrogate that Byron knew all his lines and he, himself, knew most of his.

On the way home from Harrogate when a change of horses was made, Byron settled into the carriage and announced to Pigot that he would now write the prologue for the play. 'I'll spin a prologue for our play' was his actual words, and before the coach reached Mansfield, say within three hours, this was done. According to Pigot, Byron's thought process was only once interrupted when he turned to his friend and asked the proper pronunciation of the French word 'debut'. On being given the answer Byron exclaimed 'Ay, that will do for a rhyme to 'new'. The opening of the prologue then reads as follows:

*Since the refinement of this polish'd age
Has swept immoral raillery from the stage;
Since taste has now expunged licentious wit,
Which stamp'd disgrace on all an author writ;*

*Since now to please with purer scenes we seek,
Nor dare to call the blush from Beauty's cheek;
Oh! let the modest Muse some pity claim,
And meet indulgence, though she find not fame.
Still, not for her alone we wish respect,
Others appear more conscious of defect:
Tonight no veteran Roscil you behold,
In all the arts of scenic action old;
No Cooke, no Kemble, can salute you here,
No Siddons draw the sympathetic tear;
Tonight you throng to witness the debut
Of embryo actors, to the Drama new.*

This prologue is referred to as the prologue to 'The Wheel of Fortune' simply because this was the first of the two plays to be performed. What I have just read is approximately one half of the prologue, which Byron wrote during that short journey in the carriage taking him and Pigot back to Southwell. In contrast to Byron's agile mind, he points out to Elizabeth that her brother is 'now seized with poetic mania and is rhyming away at the rate of three lines per hour!'

Byron was quick to learn that there had been only one full rehearsal during his absence. He then quickly arranged for the second rehearsal commenting that 'he was very dissatisfied with some of the performers'. However they assured him in typical fashion with words to the effect that 'it would be alright on the night!' They had just three weeks to get it right! Miss Bristoe comments:

At the end of three weeks, during which period we had rehearsed twelve times, our little theatre was finished, and tickets, with Lord Byron's name and seal affixed, were distributed to our acquaintance, announcing Wednesday the 15th for the day of the first performance.

Miss Bristoe, who played the leading female part of Mrs Woodville, spoke in glowing terms about Byron's portrayal of the leading character of Penruddock in Cumberland's play the 'Wheel of Fortune'. She certainly remembered that Byron had requested that they rehearse their rolls together—but alone! Richard Cumberland, born in 1732, was still living at the time of this production. This play had been written in 1795 and had recently been performed in London, where Byron may well have seen it. Cumberland wrote down his own memoirs, which are much

valued for his commentary on David Garrick, with whom he had been personally acquainted.

Byron seems also to have coped well with managing the production side. There were a number of side issues for him to contend with. For instance, a man in the choir asked Byron if he could perform and sing 'The Death of Abercromby' during the interval between the play and the farce 'in character'. Byron's reply was to the effect that if the man was so desirous to make a fool of himself, 'I e'en let him!'

General Sir Ralph Abercromby had been mortally wounded in 1801, just five years before these Southwell theatricals, near Alexandria, while commanding the British forces clearing the last remnants of Napoleon's army out of Egypt. In much the same manner as Nelson at Trafalgar just four years later, he fell in the hour of victory. An engraving of the death scene, from a painting by Francis Legat, became available in 1805 just before these Southwell theatricals, so it is quite likely that Byron and the audience would be acquainted with it. The painting is very similar to the scenes of the death of Nelson, and is now owned, though not I believe currently on display, by the National Portrait Gallery.

Abercromby was struck by a piece of shot and took seven days to finally expire. Miss Bristoe recalled that when the man, who was dressed in the uniform of the Southwell Volunteers, 'warbled out his last notes', while sinking into the arms of his two companions, also appropriately in army uniform, Byron was absolutely convulsed with laughter. The characters then prepared for the performance of Allingham's farce 'The Weathercock'.

Miss Bristoe, who played the leading female role of Variella, comments on Byron's portrayal of the leading character of Tristram Fickle.

In the whimsical character of Tristram Fickle, Lord Byron was unrivalled. He did indeed show the versatility of his genius in being competent to perform two such very opposite characters with equal excellence. There was an elegance in Lord Byron's acting which was never lost sight of and threw a peculiar charm over his comic scenes, a charm which is rarely to be met with even in the greatest comic performer on our public stage. The curtain fell amidst thundering applause.

Praise indeed for a rather inexperienced young man of eighteen! In contrast to 'The Wheel of Fortune', which is not considered suitable for

today's audiences, 'The Weathercock' has been revived and performed by the Southwell Drama Group in recent years to great acclaim. In the lead character of Tristram Fickle, it is so easy for us to imagine Byron playing the part. His Harrogate colleague John Pigot was playing his frustrated father, known in the play as 'Old Fickle', dressed in an embroidered suit which had belonged to his portly grandfather, which necessitated him stuffing a pillow down his trousers to give the desired effect. The theme of the play is the desire of the father to see his son settle into a worthwhile career, then settle down and marry. But of course the young, impressionable, Tristram after a brief, keen and enthusiastic involvement with a particular venture quickly tires and moves on when he discovers something new.

The epilogue to the play was written by the Rev. Becher, a relative of the Pigots, and delivered by Byron himself. I find the following comment rather hard to believe but it is stated nevertheless to be true:

As the Epilogue written by Mr Becher mentioned the characters individually it was the intention of the author, and the wish of Lord Byron, to group the performers on the stage, but this was objected to, especially by the female part of the company, who, although they undertook to perform, did not of course relish the idea of being pointed out to the audience, like puppets in a show, whenever their names and characters were called over by the master. The plan therefore was entirely relinquished, and Lord Byron, alone on the stage, recited the lines (as he did everything else) inimitably.

Modesty again prevailed, but what a splendid three days in Southwell! For the student to consider we have the inevitable dispute over certain views between the accounts given to John Murray, which now form part of those archives and the reports contained in Moore's biography. However, these concern only minor details and therefore for the general reader these are academic and can be put aside.

We do have, nevertheless, to consider this event in the context of Byron's life. The first thing to impact on me is its innocence. I believe this venture by Byron is unique, simply because as he grew older his reputation got in the way of whatever he did. It does, of course, even pre-date by just over one year, the attack made on him in the *Edinburgh Review*, following the publication of 'Hours of Idleness'. He had not therefore had to suffer the indignity of that attack. It seems to me that he could, without too much difficulty, have made a name for himself as an actor/ producer. It seems

to confirm to us that learning came easily to him and that his memory was such as to enable him to recall matters of detail at will.

Of course, it is Byron at home with country people, free from persons of intellect to upset his thought process. It was at a time when he was having numerous quarrels with his mother and in fact he had only recently escaped from under her critical eye in the middle of the night to take flight to London. This was done with the connivance of the Pigots, with whom he had taken refuge from her on a number of occasions. He had said that he might never return to her, however, perhaps she had received a severe shock from his departure and become a little more understanding. Bearing this in mind, it is however noticeable that her name never gets a mention during the performance of these plays, for whatever reason.

His departure for Harrogate in the run up to the opening night seems most irresponsible at first. The producer and the leading character deserting the cast! In his later life we often find those left behind in his wake having to make the best of things. I don't believe it is a question of negligence on his part, but rather that he doesn't seem to be aware that others find it difficult to keep up and adjust to his pace. Yes, he knew his lines perfectly; and his co-ordination with others, the lesser mortals, no doubt he could perceive to his own satisfaction. However the effect on these lesser mortals does not appear to have been considered. Byron thrived on what others found difficult.

While staying at Harrogate he even switched his mind to writing another poem, 'To A Beautiful Quaker'-- such diversity:

*Sweet girl! Though only once we met,
That meeting I shall ne'er forget;
And though we ne'er may meet again,
Remembrance will thy form retain.
I would not say, 'I love,' but still
My senses struggle with my will. Etc, etc*

In conclusion I can't help but think that this event in his life had all the exuberance of a talented young man about to find his way in the world. From his comments years later we can be confident that this first venture into the life of his community, away from the academic world, brought him immense satisfaction. He would not of course have been aware of his destiny. However his restless mind would seem not to allow him to pursue a purposeful course through life. Samuel Rogers' thoughts come

to mind expressed in his poem, 'Byron recalled at Bologna', written after Byron's death:

*Yes, Byron, thou art gone—gone like a star that through the firmament
shot and was lost in its eccentric course—dazzling, perplexing. Yet thy
heart methinks was noble—noble in its scorn of all things low and little—
nothing there sordid or servile!*

This unique and grand occasion at Southwell provides us with a very early example of his special qualities and in my view should always be taken into consideration when assessing his life, his character and his achievements!

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