Byron's Minor Poetry on British Politics

edited by Peter Cochran

Byron's most important political poems are not in this section: see *Napoleonic Poems, The Devil's Drive, Don Juan* (intermittently throughout, but especially the Dedication), *The Vision of Judgement, The Irish Avatar, The Age of Bronze,* and the two Venetian tragedies. But politics is a focus of his poetry from his juvenile books onwards (see *On the Death of Mr. Fox,* from *Fugitive Pieces),* and is never far from his mind.

What exactly Byron's politics were, however, has long been a question for debate. Every political persuasion from Marxist to Monarchist tries to argue he was one of them, only for an opposing side to adduce evidence that he was one of *them*. He was doubtless on the side of freedom against oppression – but no-one argues *for* "oppression"! They always disguise it as a redefined freedom. What kind of freedom Byron envisaged for the voters of England – which would have been the principle domestic issue for him, had he lived another ten years – is a question which we ask in vain: he never writes in detail about parliamentary reform. We can tell from his first House of Lords speech that he felt compassion for the starving Nottinghamshire frame-breakers: but he shows no signs of wanting to give them the vote. We can tell from his second House of Lords speech that he thought the Catholics should get the vote – but *which* Catholics, propertied, titled, middle-class or otherwise – he doesn't say.

He often feigned disdain for politics. On January 16th 1814 he wrote in his journal,

> As for me, by the blessing of indifference, I have simplified my politics into an utter detestation of all existing governments; and, as it is the shortest and most agreeable and summary feeling imaginable, the first moment of an universal republic would convert me into an advocate for single and uncontradicted despotism. The fact is, riches are power, and poverty is slavery, all over the earth, and one sort of establishment is no better nor worse for a *people* than another. I shall adhere to my party, because it would not be honourable to act otherwise; but, as to *opinions*, I don't think politics *worth* an *opinion*. *Conduct* is another thing: – if you begin with a party, go on with them. I have no consistency, except in politics; and *that* probably arises from my indifference on the subject altogether.[1]

It is, at the least, a strange formulation; at the most, a cop-out: of course politics is "*worth* an *opinion*"! If he was indifferent to politics, why did he value consistent loyalty to a party ("I still retain my "Buff and blue")?[2] Why did he volunteer to fight for the Carbonari in Italy, and die trying to fight for Greece? He implies in the passage that British politics are for him a matter of class or clan loyalty first, and of ideas a long way second. This absolves him from the need to define any specific principles.

In fact Byron had no political principles beyond the vaguest Whiggish, patrician ones. His attitude to politics wavered as much as did his attitude to religion. It depended on who he was writing to. We look in vain for consistency, and should enjoy the variety his chameleon talent provided. Many of the poems below are from letters, and cannot be fully understood out of context. I have given references to Marchand's edition of the letters and journals.

1: BLJ III 242.
2: *Don Juan* Dedication, 17, 4.

Early and general poems

from a letter to Thomas Moore, June 21st 1821[3]

The world is a bundle of hay,
Mankind are the asses who pull,
Each tugs it a different way, –
And the greatest of all is John Bull!

from a letter to Lady Melbourne, September 21st 1813[4]

'Tis said – *Indifference* marks the present time
Then hear the reason – though 'tis told in rhyme –
A King who *can't* – a Prince of Wales who *don't* –
Patriots who shan't, and Ministers who *won't* –
What matters who are *in* or *out* of place
The *Mad* – the *Bad* – the *Useless* – or the *Base*?

On the King's Speech to the Bishop of Bristol

When royal George the mitre placed
Upon the sprightliest head of Cam,[5]
Thus spoke the King his high behest
"Doctor, we've done with Epigram!"

Alas! my liege thy maddest fits
Could hardly conjure such a wish up,
For Christ-sake! make thy *Bishops* wits,
Not sink a *wit* into a – *Bishop*. –

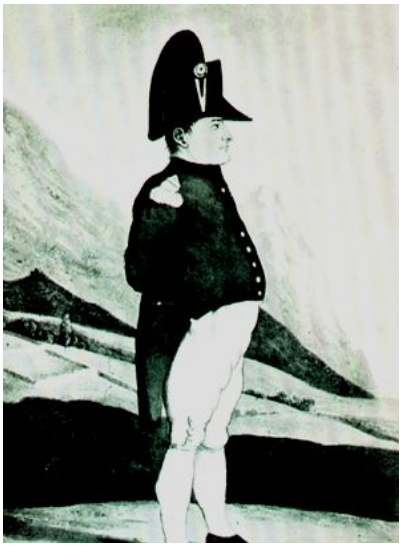
On the Same

From Crown and Mitre Wit alike hath flown,
George damped poor Mansel's and hath lost his own.

Grieve, Grieve no more, whom no high honours wait,
But view the evils of exalted State:
Cares of a Crown have addled George's skull,
And lo! a Mitre makes our Mansel dull.

3: BLJ VIII 141.
4: BLJ III 117.
5: William Lort Mansel, the new Bishop of Bristol, had been Master of Trinity College Cambridge when B. was there.

Two poems on Napoleon




Napoleon: two versions

from a letter to Thomas Moore, March 27th 1815[6]

Once fairly set out on his party of pleasure,
Taking towns at his liking and crowns at his leisure,
From Elba to Lyons and Paris he goes,
Making *balls for* the ladies and *bows to* his foes.

Prometheus and Napoleon[7]

Unlike the offence, though like would be the fate,
His to give life, but *thine* to desolate;
He stole from Heaven the flame, for which he fell,
Whilst *thine* was stolen from thy native Hell.

6: BLJ IV 284.
7: B. had wanted Napoleon to be an enlightener of men, like Prometheus.

Poems about working-class radicalism

Cobbett

Paine

from a letter to Thomas Moore, January 2nd 1820[8]

In digging up your bones, Tom Paine,[9]
Will. Cobbett[10] has done well:
You visit him on earth again,
He'll visit you in hell.
Or,
You'll come to him on earth again,
He'll visit you in hell.

from a letter to Thomas Moore, December 24th 1816[11]

As the Liberty lads o'er the sea
Gave their freedom, and cheaply, with blood,
So we, boys we
Will *die* fighting, or *live* free,
And down with all kings but King Ludd![12]

When the web that we weave is complete,
And the shuttle exchanged for the sword,
We will fling the winding-sheet
O'er the despot at our feet,
And dye it deep in the gore it has poured.

Though black as his heart its hue,
Since his veins are corrupted to mud,
Yet this is the dew
That the tree shall renew
Of Liberty, planted by Ludd!

8: BLJ VII 17.
9: Tom Paine (1737-1809), author of *The Rights of Man* and *The Age of Reason*, the age's leading radical.
10: William Cobbett (1763-1835), a later radical who in 1819 returned from America with Paine's bones, which he intended to bury magnificently. He never got round to it.
11: BLJ V 149.
12: "King Ludd" (also "Captain Ludd" or Ned Ludd") was named after Ned Ludlam, a Leicestershire stocking-worker whipped for breaking the needles of his frames. The employers tried to introduce new machines which, by rendering many workers redundant, caused mass unemployment and starvation in the English Midlands.

An Ode to the Framers of the Frame Bill[13]

1.

Oh well done Lord E—n![14] and better Lord R—r![15]
Britannia must prosper with councils like yours;
HAWKESBURY,[16] HARROWBY,[17] help you to guide her,
Whose remedy only must *kill* ere it cures:
Those villains, the Weavers, are all grown refractory,
Asking some succour for Charity's sake –
So hang them in clusters round each Manufactory,
That will at once put an end to *mistake*.[18]

2.

The rascals, perhaps may betake them to robbing,
The dogs to be sure have nothing to eat –
So if we can hang them for breaking a bobbin,
'Twill save all the Government's money and meat;
Men are more easily made than machinery –
Stockings fetch better prices than lives –
Gibbets on Sherwood will *heighten* the scenery,
Showing how Commerce, *how* Liberty thrives!

3.

Justice is now in pursuit of the wretches,
Grenadiers, Volunteers, Bow-street Police,
Twenty-two Regiments, a score of Jack Ketches,[19]
Three of the Quorum and two of the Peace;
Some Lords, to be sure, would have summoned the Judges,
To take their opinion, but that they ne'er shall,
For LIVERPOOL such a concession begrudges,
So now they're condemned by *no Judges* at all.

4.

Some folks for certain have thought it was shocking,
When Famine appeals, and when Poverty groans,
That life should be valued at less than a stocking,
And the breaking of frames lead to breaking of bones.
If it should prove so, I trust, by this token,
(And who will refuse to partake in the hope?)
That the frames of the fools may be first to be *broken*,
Who, when asked for a *remedy*, sent down a *rope*.

13: B. published this poem anonymously in the *Morning Chronicle* on March 2nd 1812, five days after he gave his speech in the Lords attacking the bill which would have condemned the Nottinghamshire machine-breakers to death. It wasn't printed again until 1880.
14: John Scott, first Earl of Eldon (1751-1838), Lord Chancellor.
15: Richard Ryder, first Earl of Harrowby (1766-1832), Home Secretary.
16: Courtesy title during his father's life of Robert Banks Jenkinson, second Earl of Liverpool (1770-1828), Prime Minister during all of B.'s adult life.
17: Harrowby is Ryder.
18: Eldon referred to one Nottinghamshire riot as "a mistake".
19: *Jack Ketches* – public hangmen.

Poems about the Royal Family

Few monarchs can have been held in such contempt by his subjects as was George IV. A loose liver – unlike his father – his adulteries were well-known (they included one with Byron's friend Lady Melbourne); the further public knowledge that he was a wild spender, constantly having to be bailed out from the public purse, a foolish, querulous personality to boot, and a blind conservative politically, all allied with his corpulence to create a very poor public image indeed.

Lines to a Lady Weeping

In 1811 the mad King George III was finally declared unfit to rule, and his son was appointed Prince Regent. Before taking charge of the country, "Prinny" had been a friend to the Whigs, but now he sensed that if they formed a government they might not indulge his constant demands for cash. At a Carleton House banquet on February 22nd 1812, he abused them openly, forcing a division between him and them. His sixteen-year-old daughter, Princess Charlotte, was upset at his open treachery and rudeness, and broke down, whereupon he ordered her out. Byron, who hadn't been there, heard about it the next morning, and wrote these two verses. They were published anonymously the following month, and became notorious.

Weep, daughter of a royal line,
A Sire's disgrace, a realm's decay;
Ah! happy if each tear of thine
Could wash a father's fault away!

Weep – for thy tears are Virtue's tears
Auspicious to these suffering isles;
And be each drop in future years
Repaid thee by thy people's smiles!

Princess Charlotte, by Lawrence

Lines composed on the occasion of His Royal Highness the Prince Regent being seen standing between the coffins of Henry VIII and Charles I, in the royal vault at Windsor[20]

Famed for contemptuous breach of sacred ties,
By headless Charles see heartless Henry lies;
Between them stands another sceptred thing[21] –
It moves, it reigns – in all but name, a king:
Charles to his People, Henry to his Wife,[22]
In him the double Tyrant starts to Life:
Justice and Death have mixed their dust in vain,
Each Royal Vampire wakes to life again.
Ah, what can tombs avail! – since these disgorge
The blood and dust of both – to mould a George.

Or,[23]

Famed for their civil & domestic quarrels
See heartless Henry lie by headless Charles!
Between them stands another sceptred *thing*
It lives, it reigns – "aye every inch a king!"[24]
Charles to his people – Henry to his wife,
The double tyrant starts at once to life,
Justice & Death have mixed their dust in vain
Each royal vampire quits his vault again!
Curst be the tomb that could so soon disgorge
Two such to make a Janus or a George.

Or,

The royal Vampires join and rise again.
What now can tombs avail, since these disgorge
The blood and dirt of both to mould a George!

20: Upon the completion at Windsor in 1813 of a mausoleum to George III, the body of Charles I (with head severed) was found in the vault of Henry VIII. The Prince Regent had officiated at the coffin's opening.
21: The Regent.
22: The Regent, B. implies, tyrannises over his household just as he does over the country.
23: This version is from a letter to Lady Melbourne, April 7th 1813 (BLJ III 38).
24: *King Lear*, IV vi 107. Lear describes himself ironically.

The Prince Regent and Lord Edward Fitzgerald from a letter to John Murray, August 12th 1819[25]

Lord Edward Fitzgerald (1763-98), was one of the leaders of the revolt of the Society of the United Irishmen. He had been on the continent trying to raise funds, and French support, for the rebellion, and refused to escape from Ireland when it was brutally put down. When the authorities tried to arrest him he fought, was injured, and died untreated in prison. An Act of Attainder confiscating his property was passed, but repealed by the Prince Regent in 1819.

Lord Edward Fitzgerald

To be the father of the fatherless,
To stretch the hand from the throne's height, and raise
His offspring, who expired in other days
To make thy Sire's Sway by a kingdom less, –
This is to be a Monarch, and repress
Envy into unutterable praise.
Dismiss thy Guard, and trust thee to such traits,
For who would lift a hand, except to bless? –
Were it not easy, Sir, and is't not sweet
To make thyself beloved? and to be
Omnipotent by Mercy's means? for thus
Thy Sovereignty would grow but more complete:
A Despot thou, and yet thy people free,
And by the Heart, not Hand, enslaving Us.

25: BLJ VI 209.

Queen Caroline

In 1820 (before his coronation), the promiscuous George decided to put his wife, Caroline of Brunswick, on semi-trial for adultery. The case had to be withdrawn in embarrassment (despite the obvious irregularity of the Queen's life), and the Queen became the focus of a massive political discontent which enveloped the disenfranchised middle-class and working-class up and down the land, and which was exacerbated when she was excluded both from the Coronation Oath and from the ceremony itself. Only a short while later she died, stoic but miserable. George's reputation plummeted lower still. J.C.Hobhouse was one of her champions; but Byron jokes about her sexual appetite here, and at *Don Juan* V st.61.


Queen Caroline: two versions

Queen Caroline: from a letter to John Murray, August 17th 1820[26]

Mr. Hoby the Bootmaker's soft heart is sore
For seeing the Queen makes him think of Jane Shore[27] –
And in fact such a likeness should always be seen –
Why should Queens be not whores? Every *Whore* is a *Quean*.

The Braziers' Company's address to Queen Caroline: from a letter to John Murray of January 6th 1821[28]

It seems that the Braziers propose soon to pass
An Address and to bear it themselves *all* in *brass;*
A Superfluous Pageant, for by the Lord Harry!
They'll *find* where they're going, much *more* than they'll carry.

—

or

—

The braziers, it seems, are preparing to pass
An address, and present it themselves all in brass, –
A superfluous pageant / trouble, for, by the Lord Harry!
They'll find where they're going much more than they carry.

26: BLJ VII 159.
27: Jane Shore was the mistress of Edward IV; she died in the east London ditch which bears her name.
28: BLJ VIII 58. The poem plays with the idea of a brazen address (i.e., one set in brass) being presented to a brazen woman (i.e., a shameless one).

George IV

1.
Pall Mall lay all sparkling before me[29]
Where lately she never had been,
Yet I hiccuped, and something weighed o'er me
Which told me by God – she'll be queen.
I looked for Lord Hutchinson's coming,[30]
Who promised he certainly should
Bring an answer polite and becoming,
But instead it was Alderman Wood.[31]

2.
I flew to the Council – 'twas duller
Than if my old dad were alive.
Ah! would from the throne they would pull her,
Alas! why the hell did I wive?
And there stood my Jenky,[32] dejected,
Who till now made the best of the farce,
With Eldon,[33] as if he expected
The kick he deserved on the arse.

3.
There *was* a time – falsest of women –
When Wales with his motto and feather[34]
Had the hearts and the voices of freemen
And had beat you or Bergami[35] either.
But now, oh degenerate blackguard
Of Brunswick[36] – the truth's so disclosed
That if my good army don't thwack hard,
I'll be damned if I shan't be deposed.

4.
Already Reform is upon us,
The Radicals make such a rout;
She comes – and this bill has undone us,
And the Whigs cannot long be kept out.[37]
But onward, although to perdition,
Go – splash all your ink till 'tis spilt:
On our side's the Milan Commission,[38]
On *their's* is the lawyer and jilt. – 7th December 1820

29: Carlton House, the King's residence, was at one end of Pall Mall.
30: Lord Hutchinson was a Tory peer, and one of the King's supporters.
31: Sir Matthew Wood, Lord Mayor of London 1815-17. The Corporation of the City of London supported the Queen.
32: Robert Banks Jenkinson, Earl of Liverpool, George's Prime Minister.
33: Lord Eldon, the Lord Chancellor.
34: The Prince of Wales' heraldic badge is three ostrich feathers, with the motto "Ich dien" (I serve).
35: Bartolomeo Bergami was Queen Caroline's "Courier" – see *Don Juan* V st.61.
36: The Queen was originally Princess Caroline of Brunswick.
37: It was to keep the Whigs out that George had caused the upset which inspired Lines to a Lady Weeping. He thought they would limit his budget more than the Tories would.
38: The "Milan Commission" was a polite phrase used to describe the network of informers on the Queen's private life who had been bribed by the government to come from Italy to testify against her.

Poems on Politicians

William Pitt: from a letter to Thomas Moore, January 2nd 1820[39]

WITH death doom'd to grapple,
Beneath this cold slab, he
Who lied in the Chapel
Now lies in the Abbey.

Francis Burdett and George Canning: from letters to John Murray and Douglas Kinnaird, June 29th 1821[40]

Brave Champions! go on with the farce!
Reversing the spot where you bled,
Last time you were shot in the *a—se* –
Now (damn you) get knocked on the *head!*

39: BLJ VII 17. William Pitt the Younger (1759-1806), Tory Prime Minister.

40: BLJ VIII 143/5. George Canning (1770-1827), Tory Foreign Secretary (later Prime Minister), parliamentary enemy of John Cam Hobhouse and Sir Francis Burdett (177-1844), radical Whig MP and parliamentary friend of John Cam Hobhouse. They were rumoured incorrectly to be about to fight a duel over comments Burdett had made in the Commons about Canning's financially-motivated careerism.

Epigrams on Castlereagh

Adam Zamoyski describes Castlereagh as "eminently likeable," and "a thoroughly decent man in every respect".[41] He played the cello, and was fond of children. But Byron detested him above all other politicians because of his pro-imperialist stance at the Congress of Vienna, when, as Zamoyski writes, he "found himself cutting up nations and trading souls as ruthlessly as any practitioner of *realpolitik*".[42] Byron's hatred, founded in part on the way in which Castlereagh murdered the English language, is seen at its most white-hot in the Dedication to *Don Juan*.

Oh, Castlereagh![43] thou art a patriot now;
Cato died for his country, so didst thou:
He perish'd rather than see Rome enslaved,
Thou cutt' st thy throat that Britain may be saved!

So Castlereagh has cut his throat! – The worst
Of this is, – that his own was not the first.

So He has cut his throat at last! – He! ho?
The man who cut his country's long ago.

Castlereagh: from a letter to Thomas Moore, January 2nd 1820[44]

Posterity will ne'er survey
A nobler grave than this:
Here lie the bones of Castlereagh:
Stop, traveler — —

41: Adam Zamoyski, *Rites of Peace, The Fall of Napoleon & the Congress of Vienna* (Harper Press 2007), p.xiv.
42: Ibid.
43: Courtesy title during his father's life of Robert Stewart, second Marquess of Londonderry (1769-1822), unpopular Foreign Secretary who helped redesign Europe at the Congress of Vienna. Blackmailed because of a potential sexual scandal involving a young man in drag, he cut his throat on August 12th 1822.
44: BLJ VII 17.

Poems about and to John Cam Hobhouse

John Cam Hobhouse (1786-1869), was contender with Thomas Moore for the title of Byron's best friend. He was a radical Whig – he wanted a greater and more systematic measure of parliamentary reform than the mainstream Whigs did under Lord Holland. On December 14th 1819 he was arrested for what the Commons asserted was a breach of parliamentary privilege in a single sentence in *A Trifling Mistake*, a pamphlet he'd written. He was sent to Newgate without trial. The punishment made him a national hero, and on his release he was elected MP for Westminster.

from a letter to John Murray, April 9th 1820[45]

Would you go to the House by the true gate
    Much faster than ever Whig Charley went
Let the Parliament send you to Newgate,
    And Newgate will send you to Parliament.

from a letter to Thomas Moore, November 5th 1820[46]

When a man hath no freedom to fight for at home,
    Let him combat for that of his neighbours;
Let him think of the glories of Greece and of Rome,
    And get knocked on the head for his labours.

To do good to mankind is the chivalrous plan,
    And, is always as nobly requited;
Then battle for freedom wherever you can,
    And, if not shot or hanged, you'll get knighted.

45: BLJ VII 78.
46: BLJ VII 219.

My Boy Hobbie, O

This is a jolly song (more singable than any of the *Hebrew Melodies*: **see MP3 recording on this website**), but it shows Byron's wilful ignorance about the centre and the left wing of British politics. Hobhouse was not an associate of Henry ("Orator") Hunt, still less of William Cobbett. He loathed both men. But it pleases Byron to assume that he was as radical and populist as they, and that the resemblance between his politics and theirs is what has got him in prison. Byron was mean enough to send the song, not to Hobhouse, but to John Murray, and Hobhouse first heard about it at his club. It almost destroyed their friendship.

New Song
To the tune of
"Where hae ye been a' day,
My boy Tammy, O?
Courting o' a young thing,
Just come frae her Mammie, O?"[47]

1.
How came you in Hob's pound[48] to cool,
My boy Hobbie, O?
Because I bade the people pull
The House into the Lobby, O.[49]

2.
What did the House upon this call,
My boy Hobbie, O?
They voted me to Newgate all;
Which is an awkward Jobby, O.[50]

3.
Who are now the people's men,
My boy Hobby, O?
There's I and Burdett – Gentlemen,
And blackguard Hunt and Cobby, O.

4.
You hate the House – why canvass, then?
My boy Hobbie, O?
Because I would reform the den
As member for the Mobby, O.

5.
Wherefore do you hate the Whigs,
My boy Hobbie, O?
Because they want to run their rigs
As under Walpole Bobby, O.[51]

47: This traditional air was published in 1792 with an accompaniment by Haydn. The lyric expresses the singer's happiness at wooing a young girl away from her love for her mother – whom he promises to shelter as well (N.B. this is a romantic reading of the lyric).
48: Newgate.
49: This is just what Hobhouse's's enemies asserted, falsely, that he had done in *A Trifling Mistake.*
50: I have derived the comma from the Scots ballad *Edward*: "Why does yer hand sae drap wi' bluid, / And why sae sad gang ye, O?"

6.
But when we at Cambridge were,
My boy Hobbie, O,
If my memory don't err,
You founded a Whig Clubbie, O.

7.
When to the mob you make a speech,
My boy Hobbie, O,
How do you keep without their reach
The watch within your fobby, O? –[52]

8.
But never mind such petty things,
My boy Hobbie, O –
God save the people – damn all Kings –
So let us crown the Mobby, O!
Yrs truly,
(Signed) *Infidus Scurra*.[53]
March 23rd 1820.

51: The corrupt administration of Sir Robert Walpole (1721-42).
52: Hobhouse's diary for Wednesday December 8th 1819: "Burdett, Kinnaird and I got into a hackney chaise. In St Martin's Lane the mob pulled off the horses and wanted to draw us. Kinnaird got out of [the] window, and Burdett and I soon after struggled out at the door. *I had my watch stolen – Burdett lost a petition out of his pocket.* We were followed by a crowd shouting all the way to Burdett's house."
53: *Infidus Scurra* – roughly, "plausible rogue". The phrase had been used by B. and Hobhouse to describe Scrope Davies.