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On the trail of Byron in Switzerland

Exiled from England, the poet Lord Byron (1788–1824) stayed in Switzerland from May to October 1816. Sailing on Lake Geneva and trips into the Alps provided the inspiration for two major works. We go on the trail of one of the first romantics.

By Alain Wey

Who was Lord Byron? He was England's literary equivalent of a rock star at the start of the 19th century, having risen to fame overnight after the publication of the first two cantos of *Childe Harold* (1812), which recount his adventures and reflections on travel in Portugal, Spain, Greece and Turkey. He is also the poet most quoted by Robin Williams in the well-known film "Dead Poets Society" (1989). A seducer from a wealthy background with a seat in the House of Lords, he was forced to leave England in 1816 after the scandal caused by his divorce and his incestuous relationship with his half-sister, Augusta. He was 28. The pioneer of the wave of literary romanticism stayed in Switzerland from May to October where he wrote *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Canto III and *The Prisoner of Chillon*. Let's go back in time in pursuit of this poet who never went anywhere without his swordstick.

The Villa Diodati

Byron reached Switzerland via Flanders and Germany as the French government refused him a passport. He was accompanied by his valet Fletcher, two servants, his courier Berger and his doctor Polidori. The poet passed through Lucerne on 17 May 1816 and reached Berne on 23. Passing through Avenches and Lausanne, he arrived in Geneva and stayed at the *hôtel d'Angleterre* in Sécheron where he entered a fabricated age in the register – one hundred! Here he met

up with the poet Percy Shelley (1792–1822), who was accompanied by his wife Mary and Claire Clairmont, Byron's future mistress. The two writers dined together and spent their evenings sailing on Lake Geneva, both sharing a passion for the water. On 10 June, Byron moved into the Villa Diodati in Coligny, on the south-west shore of the lake, where Shelley also rented a house. The location provided him with a haven of peace and tranquillity. Sometimes, in the morning, he would sit on the villa's large balcony and work on *Childe Harold* or *Darkness*. He

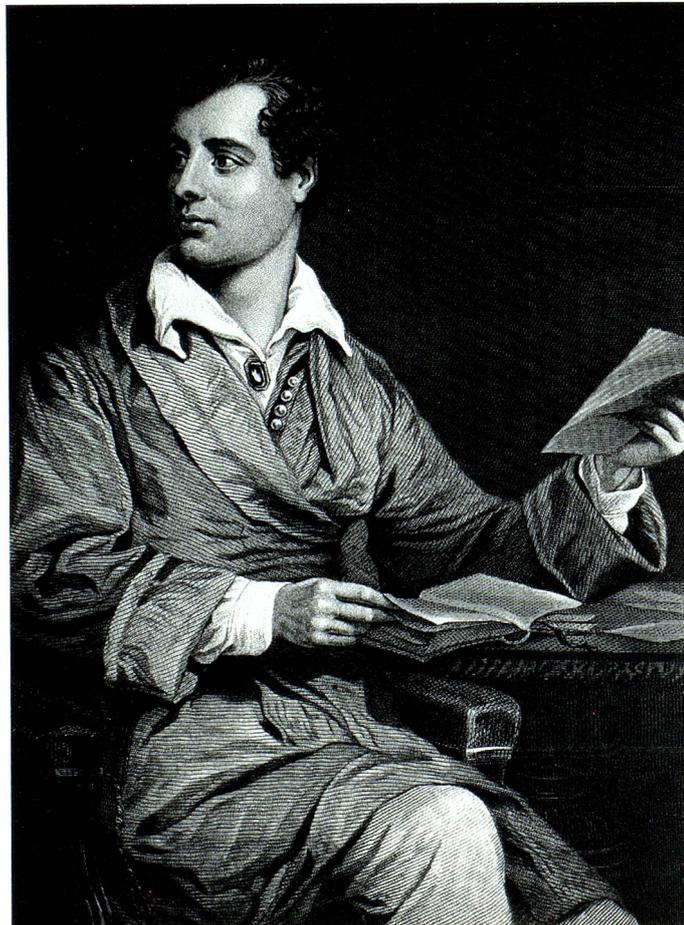
never tired of lakeside reverie and walks in the hillside. In his boat with an English keel Byron sometimes set out onto Lake Geneva at night during storms, indifferent to the dangers. One very windy morning when he was sailing alone on the choppy waters of the lake, the alarm was raised to send out for help. When he returned ashore, Byron thanked his poor rescuers by causing a terrible scene, remonstrating with them for having interrupted his meditations.

The birth of Frankenstein

Torrential rain, gloomy nights and the reading of German folk tales stimulated the imagination. Byron proposed that each of his companions write a ghost story – Shelley and his wife, Polidori and he himself. He produced a vampire story but without much conviction. It was Mary Shelley who best rose to the challenge. After a terrible nightmare, she finally unearthed the protagonist of her ghost story. The following day, she started to write *Frankenstein*, which, after starting out as a short story, became a novel.

The Castle of Chillon and its prisoner

On 22 June, Byron and Shelley went on a boat tour of the lake, sailing along the shores of Savoy, passing Evian, Tourronde, Lugrin and Meillerie before reaching Saint-Gingolph on 24 June, where they encountered a storm which nearly cost them their lives. After passing Villeneuve, the noble silhouette of the Castle of Chillon appeared at the foot of the rocks. This was the sanctuary of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the setting for *La Nouvelle Héloïse*. Excitedly exploring the depths of the castle, the two poets came across the dungeon with seven pillars hidden beneath the level of the lake. Byron discovered the story of the prisoner, François Bonivard, a prior locked up there from 1530 to 1536 for his opposition to the Duke of Savoy who was attempting to seize control of Geneva. They then went on



The English poet, Lord George Byron (1788–1824)

to Clarens, still following in Rousseau's footsteps. They finally arrived in Ouchy (Lausanne) where Byron rapidly penned *The Prisoner of Chillon* on 28 June. The literary impact of this tour of the lake turned out to be immense. On his return, Byron spent the months of July and August in the Villa Diodati, writing, going for walks, sailing and sometimes receiving guests from England. He also frequently visited the writer Mme de Staël in Coppet, who eulogistically told him: "Lake Geneva owes you gratitude, Mylord!" On 29 August, Shelley and his wife left Cologne for England and Byron headed to Chamonix and Mont Blanc.



Anne Isabella Noel Byron (1792–1860), Lord Byron's wife.

Journey into the Alps

On 17 September, Byron set out on a journey into the Bernese Oberland with two English friends. They passed through Les Avants (up above Montreux), the Jaman Pass, Simmental, Thun and Interlaken before arriving in Lauterbrunnen, a village nestled between the peaks where streams fall from vertiginous cliffs into the void. He was mesmerised by the Staubbach Falls: "The torrent is in shape, curving over the rock, like the tail of a white horse streaming in the wind."* Passing through Wengernalp, the

poet lingered contemplatively before the Eiger, Mönch and Jungfrau, stretching out in front of him in all of their 4,000 metres of splendour. He was fascinated by how the glaciers cut through forests, by avalanches and the cascades of ice. He descended via Grindelwald before arriving at Lake Brienz and returning to Interlaken. In Fribourg, the poet bought a "horrible" dog without a tail called Mutz who bit everyone. On 29 September, he returned to the Villa Diodati. Byron wanted to spend the winter in Italy and

had to set off before the passes were closed due to snow. He thought he would be returning because he did not sell his boat and put it to anchor in the port of Geneva.

On 5 October, he headed towards Valais, stopping in Saint-Maurice, crossing the Rhône Valley and admiring the waterfall at Pissevache before going on to Martigny, Sion, Sierre, Loèche and Viège. At Brig, he climbed the Simplon Pass to reach Italy. Lord Byron never returned to Switzerland and would never see England again. In 1824, he took up the cause of the insurgents against Turkish rule in Greece and died of malaria aged 36. The five months he spent in Switzerland were significant in such a short lifetime. And his verses from *Childe Harold* still resonate today: "Once more upon

the waters! yet once more! And the waves bound beneath me as a steed. That knows his rider. Welcome to their roar!"**

Byron et Shelley en Suisse et en Savoie, by Claire-Éliane Engel, Librairie Dardel, Chambéry, 1930

* A Journal, 23 September, Letters and Journals, Lord Byron.

** *Childe Harold*, Canto III, verse 2

"... yonder Alpine snow, Imperishably pure beyond all things below."

"Lake Lemman woos me with its crystal face,
The mirror where the stars and mountains view

The stillness of their aspect in each trace
Its clear depth yields of their far height and hue:

There is too much of man here, to look through

With a fit mind the might which I behold;
But soon in me shall Loneliness renew
Thoughts hid, but not less cherished than of old..."

Childe Harold, Canto III, verses 67–68 (LXVII–LXVIII)

"And Jura answers, through her misty shroud,
Back to the joyous Alps, who call to her aloud!"

Canto III, verse 92

"Clarens! sweet Clarens! birthplace of deep Love!

Thine air is the young breath of passionate thought;"

"Clarens! by heavenly feet thy paths are trod, -
Undying Love's, who here ascends a throne
To which the steps are mountains;"

"Twas not for fiction chose Rousseau this spot,
Peopling it with affections; but he found
It was the scene which passion must allot
To the mind's purified beings;"

Canto III, verses 99, 100, 104

"Here are the Alpine landscapes which create
A fund for contemplation; - to admire
Is a brief feeling of a trivial date;
But something worthier do such scenes inspire.

Here to be lonely is not desolate."

Epistle to Augusta, verse 8, lines 1–5