Chapter 1

Life

Childhood, boyhood, youth (1788–1809)

On 9 June 1779, a penniless army captain and remote member of an ancient English aristocratic family married his lover, the recently divorced and independently wealthy Amelia, Marchioness of Carmarthen, at Bath, the marital meat market of Georgian England. Their only surviving child, Augusta, was born in January 1783. Amelia died a year later, at which point Captain Byron lost the use of her income. (Augusta was brought up by relations until her own marriage in 1807.) In May 1785, 'Mad Jack' Byron was married again, once more at Bath, to Catherine Gordon, inheritor of a Scottish estate worth £30,000. Within three years he had almost expended his second wife's inheritance, and she was pregnant in London with their only child.

The boy born on 22 January 1788 would become one of the most famous men in Europe, Britain's first authentic literary celebrity, one of its most eminent poets and enduring personalities, the author of the greatest long poem in English since *Paradise Lost* (1667) and the greatest comic poem in any language, and an example to freedom fighters worldwide for decades after his death in 1824. Yet he was born with a club foot in a rented room off Oxford Street, while his father kept away from London to avoid his creditors. Captain Byron soon escaped to France, and would die there in 1791 in the arms of his sister – with whom he had had a sexual affair. His wife had managed to secure a portion of her estate that gave her an income of £150 a year, and in the summer of 1789 she went home with her child to live in Aberdeen. Her son scarcely saw his father again.

A life of genteel poverty beckoned until the grandson of the fifth Lord Byron died on an obscure front of the French Revolutionary Wars in 1794. Unexpectedly, the Scottish schoolboy became heir to a title and a substantial estate in Nottinghamshire, and after his grand-uncle's death in 1798 he duly succeeded. Mother and son camped in the uninhabitable family seat of Newstead Abbey before retreating to local lodgings. While Byron was there repeated attempts were made to heal his foot, and a Scottish nurse was dismissed for sexually abusing him while drunk. He was also introduced to the family lawyer, John Hanson, whose ineptitude would be the bane of his adult life, though Byron was too loyal to give him the sack.

As an apprentice aristocrat Byron required a proper education, and after some hurried teaching at a preparatory school in Dulwich he entered Harrow school in April 1801. Newstead having been leased, he spent holidays either with the Hanson family or his mother, depending on the state of their relations. (Mrs Byron – widowed at 26 – was shrewd, tactless, literal-minded, forthright, proud, obstreperous, and stout; but she also used money to curry favour with her son, as she had with his father.) Byron's early years at Harrow were unstable, but his last eighteen months there were happy, marked by a series of intense friendships, often with boys younger than himself.

In his vacations Byron spent time with another surrogate family, the Pigots, neighbours of his mother, who brought him out of his shell and encouraged his early poetry. He also fell in love with a distant cousin, Mary Chaworth, two years his senior. As a 16-year-old he experimented with London life, and perhaps lost what May Gray had left of his virginity – certainly he recollected attending 'Whore's Hops' at London taverns 'when I was a younker in my teens' (*LJ* VII. 224).

On 24 October 1805, Byron arrived at Trinity College, Cambridge to read for a Bachelor of Arts. 'It was one of the deadliest and heaviest feelings of my life', he wrote sixteen years later, 'to feel that I was no longer a boy' (*LJ* IX. 37). Though he resided at college for only three of the nine terms required for his degree, and attended no lectures – 'nobody here seems to look into an author ancient or modern if they can avoid it' (*LJ* I. 80) – aristocratic privilege allowed him to graduate with a Master of Arts degree in July 1808. He had an allowance of £500 a year, which he spent liberally among local tailors and wine merchants, but also on forays into London. His overspending rapidly grew out of control, and to finance it he resorted to loans on the basis of his inheritance. He also prepared his first volume of poems, *Fugitive Pieces*, printed in November 1806 and republished the following year as *Hours of Idleness*. A lifetime's campaign against his plumpness started with a regime of exercise and under-nourishment, and the 19-year-old declared himself an agnostic.

By the end of 1807, Byron was finished with Cambridge, but not with the friendships he had made there: his life-long friend John Cam Hobhouse, the homosexual radical Charles Skinner Matthews, and a Trinity College choirboy, two years his junior, John Edleston. He entertained various plans for poems and travels before starting a satire, 'British Bards'. In February 1808, a withering critique of *Hours of Idleness* appeared in the prestigious *Edinburgh Review*, over which Byron stewed as 'British Bards' gradually became a more all-encompassing broadside, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers*. Relations with his mother deteriorated as those with his undergraduate cronies matured during country-house entertainments at Newstead – one side effect of which was an illegitimate child by a maid at the house in 1809.

By November 1808, Byron's debts already amounted to the very substantial sum of £12,000 and the only avenue of escape he could conceive of was to follow his father's footsteps to the Continent, where living costs were lower. His depression was deepened by the death of his Newfoundland dog, Boatswain: the first of many beloved dogs and other pets. (There would be another Newfoundland, Lyon, with him when he died.) On 13 March 1809, just after his twenty-first birthday, he took his seat in the House of Lords. On 2 July, Byron and Hobhouse set sail to Lisbon from Falmouth after a long delay during which he wrote suggestively to Matthews about the homosexual possibilities of the ancient naval town.

Grand Tour and years of fame (1809–1816)

Byron's Grand Tour was unusual in that he was driven south by Napoleon's occupation of central Europe (see Table 1). He and Hobhouse arrived at Lisbon on 7 July and within three weeks were at Gibraltar, having visited Seville and Cadiz, cities safely to the south of the Peninsular War. Even as they travelled, the bloody but indecisive battle of Talavera was being fought south of Madrid. From Gibraltar they sailed to Britain's other Mediterranean stronghold, Malta, where they arrived on 31 August and stayed three weeks. There, Byron had his first recorded love affair with a woman of his own class, the glamorous Mrs Constance Spencer Smith.

By the end of September, Byron and Hobhouse were well off the beaten track, at Patras on the Gulf of Corinth, from where they travelled north-west into Albania. At Tepelene, where they arrived on 19 October, Byron introduced himself to the Muslim warlord Ali Pasha, who praised his aristocratic features and sexually propositioned him. Byron also began writing a narrative poem

Table 1. *The itinerary of Byron's Grand Tour (1809–11)*

DATE	PLACE
1809	
19 June	Leaves London
21 June–2 July	Falmouth
7–20 July	Lisbon
12–16 July	Visits Cintra [Sintra], Portugal
25–27 July	Seville [Sevilla], Spain
29 July–3 Aug.	Cadiz, Spain
4–16 Aug.	Gibraltar
27 Aug.	Cagliari, Sardinia
31 Aug.–21 Sept.	Malta
26 Sept.	Patras [Patra], Greece
28 Sept.–1 Oct.	Prevesa [Preveza], Greece
5–11 Oct.	Jannina [Ioannina], Greece
12 Oct.	Zitsa, Greece
19–23 Oct.	Tepelene [Tepelenë], Albania
26 Oct.–3 Nov.	Jannina
8–13 Nov.	Prevesa
20 Nov.	Missolonghi [Mesolongi], Greece
22 Nov.–4 Dec.	Patras
5–14 Dec.	Vostitza [Aigio], Greece
14 Dec.	Salona [Amfissa], Greece
15 Dec.	Delphi, Greece
22 Dec.	Thebes [Thiva], Greece
25 Dec.	Arrives Athens
1810	
23 Jan.	Cape Sunium [Sounio], Greece
28 Feb.	Visits the Parthenon
5 Mar.	Leaves Athens
8 Mar.–11 Apr.	Smyrna [Izmir], Turkey
13 Mar.	Ephesus [Efes], Turkey
15 Apr.	Troy [Trava], Turkey
3 May	Swims the Hellespont [Dardanelles]
13 May–14 July	Constantinople [Istanbul]
10 July	Audience with Sultan Mahmoud II
18–21 July	Athens
25 July	Vostitza
26 July	Patras
Aug.	Tripolitza [Tripolis], Greece
19 Aug.–15 Sept.	Athens
late Sept.–early Oct.	Patras
13 Oct.	Athens
1811	
22 Apr.	Leaves Athens
30 Apr.–2 June	Malta
14 July	Arrives London

about his travels. By November, he and Hobhouse were back at Patras, having stopped at a swampy port in western Greece named Missolonghi. Byron would die there fifteen years later. They spent December travelling East by way of Parnassus, Delphi, and Thebes, and arrived at Athens on Christmas Eve, six months after leaving England.

Local sightseeing having been attended to, the pair sailed for Smyrna on the western coast of Turkey, visited Ephesus and the field of Troy, and arrived in Constantinople on 13 May 1810. During Byron's two-month stay at the capital of the Ottoman Empire he twice attended an audience with the Sultan before sailing for Athens once more in mid-July. Hobhouse now returned home, much to Byron's relief – 'I feel happier, I feel free' (*LJ* XI. 157). He continued to tour in western Greece, once with a boy named Eustathius Georgiou, the second time with another, Niccolo Giraud. The second half of 1810 saw his homosexual life at its zenith. 'Tell Matthews', he wrote to Hobhouse on 4 October 1810, 'that I have obtained above two hundred pl & opt Cs ['*plenum et optabile coitus*': the Latin poet Petronius's coded reference to 'full and perfect' sex] and am almost tired of them' (*LJ* II. 23).

The importance of Byron's homosexuality is hard to gauge. In October 1810, he was boasting of it, but nine months later he wrote to Hobhouse: 'tell Matthews I have bade adieu to every species of affection', before quoting a line from Horace to the effect that neither women nor boys interested him any more (*LJ* II. 49). From that time till his return to Greece in 1823 the only evidence we have of homosexual contact is an ambiguous letter from Percy Shelley about Byron's habits in Venice in 1818 ('He associates with wretches … who do not scruple to avow practices which are not only not named but I believe seldom even conceived in England')[1] – and in 1823, his affection for the Greek boy Loukas Chalandritsanos would appear to have been unrequited and unconsummated. Perhaps a better explanation for his numerous relationships with younger males lies in his quest for the paternal affection he had never experienced and therefore idealised. ('Can Rank, or ev'n a Guardian's name supply,' he wrote in 'Childish Recollections', 'The Love, which glistens in a Father's eye?'; *CPW* I. 165.) Unable to receive that affection from his own father, he compensated by giving it to others in sentimentally demonstrative terms.

Byron left Athens for home on 22 April 1811 – having written a satire on Lord Elgin's removal of the Parthenon marbles (*The Curse of Minerva*) as a parting shot. He took Niccolo Giraud with him, but left the boy at Malta where he himself was treated for 'a *Gonorrhea* a *Tertian fever*, & the *Hemorrhoides*, *all* of which I literally had at once' (*LJ* II. 58). On 14 July, he was back in London, and by the end of the month his travel poem had been accepted for publication

by the firm of John Murray, which would publish his work until almost the end of his career.

There then followed a series of deaths: his mother on 1 August; Charles Skinner Matthews two days later; and John Edleston, who had in fact died in May, though news reached Byron only in October. His relationship with his mother was a complicated one, but there is no need to doubt the authenticity of his grief-stricken remark to her maid: 'Oh, Mrs. By, I had but one friend in the world, and she is gone!' (Marchand, 285.)

Byron's financial situation was as bad as he had left it two years before. Immersion in London literary life constituted an escape from depression; as did a brief but humiliating affair with a Newstead housemaid, Susan Vaughan; as did his return to the House of Lords, where he delivered his maiden speech (27 February 1812) on the plight of the 'frame-breakers': industrial vandals protesting in Nottinghamshire. But on 2 March, his potential career in Parliament was abruptly terminated by the publication of his travel poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, Cantos I and II: 'I awoke one morning and found myself famous.'[2]

Fame brought attention of a kind that a lame, socially insecure, and impecunious aristocrat found difficult, but also gratifying. In April, one particular admirer, Lady Caroline Lamb – wife of George Lamb, later Lord Melbourne, Queen Victoria's favourite prime minister – began to pursue him in definite terms. 'Mad – bad – and dangerous to know', she said of him before they had exchanged a word; but also, 'That beautiful pale face is my fate' – which it proved to be, indeed (Marchand, 328, 331). The affair was short but scandalous, involving a planned elopement and numerous visits to Byron's London rooms by Lady Caroline dressed as a page. Byron wished it over very quickly, but in her head it dragged on for years, until she fictionalized it in *Glenarvon* (1816): '"kiss and tell" bad as it is,' Byron noted as regards that book, 'is surely somewhat less than – – – and *publish*' (*LJ* V. 85). Her exasperated family eventually took Lady Caroline off to Ireland, but not before Byron had dropped hints to her of his sexual activities in Greece.

Between scandal and indebtedness, Byron's depression took on a manic flavour. Newstead was put up for auction in August 1812 and he accepted an offer of £140,000 that failed to materialize over the next two years. In this mood he began *The Giaour*, the first of his 'Eastern Tales', which would be interpreted in autobiographical terms by a public eager to associate the poet with his protagonists, just as he was projecting his paranoia on to a Mediterranean backcloth.

Lady Caroline's importunities drove Byron into the arms of a woman much more to his taste. The political hostess Lady Oxford also flattered what remained of his parliamentary ambitions, and he seriously considered a second escape to

Europe with her and her husband. But late in 1812, he also proposed marriage to the high-minded Annabella Milbanke, whom he had met in the aftermath of *Childe Harold*: the only daughter of a baronet resident in County Durham. She rejected the proposal, but unconventionally sustained a correspondence with him as a fascinating soul it was her mission to save. In June 1813, *The Giaour* was published, and Byron's plans to accompany Lady Oxford collapsed, ending their relationship. The Newstead purchaser continued to haggle, and Byron's financial situation grew worse.

That situation was intensified by Byron's shopping addiction, itself a sign of depression and low self-esteem. Aristocratic gentlemen were expected to dress well, but Byron's lavishness in proportion to his poverty is frightening. Take fine white quilted waistcoats, for example, 'for which he had an enthusiasm which caused him to buy them in surprising quantities', as his biographer Doris Langley Moore puts it, drawing on surviving outfitters' bills: 'six on March 23rd and six again on April 7th, and yet a dozen more on June 20th, 1812 – £31 4s in all':[3] the equivalent of one-fifth of his mother's annual allowance. Byron ran up debts to the value of £900 with one tailor alone between January 1812 and September 1813. Booksellers, furnishers, jewellers, and wine merchants were similarly accommodating.

But Byron's shopping would soon become the least of his problems. He had first met his half-sister Augusta in 1803, when he was 15 and she 20. They continued to correspond, and in July 1813, they began to meet again in London. By August they had begun a sexual relationship. (Six years later he wrote to her that he had 'never ceased nor can cease to feel for a moment that perfect & boundless attachment which bound & binds me to you'; *LJ* VI. 129.) His next plan, accordingly, was that he would escape to Europe with her rather than Lady Oxford.

Incest contravened ecclesiastical law in Britain, and was punishable by six months' imprisonment, whereas homosexuality was a civil offence punishable by death. But incest was hardly less scandalous. In the two years after his return from Greece there is a pattern of social as well as financial self-destructiveness in Byron that verges on the hysterical. Each affair, in combination with his literary fame, personal beauty, and mysterious reputation, seemed designed to both affront and compel public attention. The relationship with Augusta (married with several children by a dim-witted colonel, who was also her cousin) could never be revealed, but Lady Caroline had enough information on him already, and was constantly on the lookout for more. By 1815, his debts stood at £30,000, and the situation over Newstead meant that Byron remained tied to England while increasingly desperate to escape: to Sicily, the Holy Land, Holland, or Russia, as the mood took him.

Almost as soon as his affair with Augusta began, Byron resumed his correspondence with Annabella Milbanke. Then, in October 1813, he veered towards the young wife of a friend of his, Lady Frances Wedderburn Webster, whom he 'spared' only at the eleventh hour of a melodramatic courtship at Newstead. In November, he wrote *The Bride of Abydos*, concerning an apparently incestuous couple coming to a sticky end. *The Corsair* – in which the hero loses a worthy love for a murderous and shameful one – followed in December. 'A wife', he wrote in January 1814, 'would be my salvation' (*LJ* III. 241). His political profile was dramatically radicalized by the republication of 'Lines to a Lady Weeping', which ridiculed the Prince of Wales, alongside *The Corsair* in February.

A codicil to the Eastern Tales, *Lara*, was published in August 1814; it was the first publication for which Byron accepted payment from John Murray. Byron's epistolary courtship of Annabella continued alongside his affair with Augusta until September 1814, when the former unexpectedly accepted him. They had not seen each other for nearly a year, and he delayed visiting his fiancée for six weeks, by which time the Milbanke family was almost prostrate with nerves. Byron and Annabella married at the bride's home on 2 January 1815, and after a 'treaclemoon' (*LJ* IV. 263) they arrived in London at the end of March, settling in an oversized townhouse in Piccadilly belonging to the Duchess of Devonshire. In early April, Augusta arrived for what became a ten-week visit.

Many of the stories told of the Byrons' marriage are, by their nature, unsubstantiated. But they suggest a pattern of mental cruelty and uxoriousness certainly not inconceivable in a man under intolerable pressure who feels he has made a grave mistake by involving someone else in his predicament. It seems Byron made hurtful remarks, paraded his affection for Augusta in ambiguous terms, scandalized his wife with accounts of his previous activities, and demanded anal sex of her. Yet there also exist touching letters between them both when they were apart. By no means everything Byron said was to be taken at face value, as his friends and half-sister had long understood. But Annabella was as literal-minded as she was sanctimonious, and had no sense of humour whatsoever. Their marriage is one of the unhappiest in English history.

In May 1815, Byron joined the management subcommittee of Drury Lane Theatre, which gave him some distractions from a dismal life at home. This was also the summer Napoleon returned to the French throne and was finally defeated at Waterloo. In November, Byron, too, seemed to be facing humiliation. Bailiffs had moved into his house, and only his title prevented him being arrested for debt. His daughter, Ada, was born on 10 December. On 15 January, she and Lady Byron left the Piccadilly house to visit her parents, apparently on good terms with the poet. Neither mother nor child saw Byron again.

On 2 February 1816, Annabella's father wrote to Byron requesting a separation: 'circumstances have come to my knowledge, which convince me, that with your opinions it cannot tend to your happiness to continue to live with Lady Byron' (Marchand, 571). Byron rejected the proposal and wrote to Annabella in disbelief, but she corresponded only in guarded terms, and refused an interview. By mid-March it was apparent the marriage was over. In early April, Byron's library was sold. Rumours spread rapidly through aristocratic circles, and his social popularity evaporated. On 21 April, Byron signed a deed of separation, and two days later his extravagant travelling coach (cost, £500) rolled out of London for Dover, leaving a mountain of debt behind it. Four days later he was in Bruges.

Exile (1816–1823)

On 4 May 1816, Byron visited Waterloo and continued a third canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, tracking his journey up the Rhine to Geneva. On 27 May, he met his fellow-poet and fellow-aristocrat Percy Bysshe Shelley there, accompanied by Shelley's lover Mary Godwin and her stepsister Claire Clairmont. The meeting had been arranged by Claire not only to show off her poetic acquaintance with Shelley, but also to resume her affair with Byron, which she had initiated during his final days in London. By 10 June, Byron had rented the Villa Diodati on the shores of Lake Geneva, with the Shelley group in a smaller house down the hill, and one of the most famous house-parties in English literary history began, involving a ghost-story-writing competition which only Mary Godwin took seriously – *Frankenstein* being the result.

Byron toured the region with Shelley for a week before the latter's party returned to England at the end of August, Shelley carrying the new canto of *Childe Harold*, Claire carrying Byron's unborn child. In September, he toured the Alps again, this time with Hobhouse, writing a travel journal for his sister, and an unprecedented drama, *Manfred*, seething with suicidal guilt and defiance. On 5 October, the friends descended into Italy. They mingled with literary and political circles in Milan, and arrived in Venice – '(next to the East) the greenest island of my imagination' (*LJ* V. 129) – in early November, just as *Childe Harold* III was published in London to continued acclaim. Byron would base himself there for three years, until the end of 1819.

In Venice, Byron at last shook off his (prodigiously productive) state of depression. He threw himself into the Venetian carnival with gusto, and began an equally prodigious number of sexual affairs – 'I think at least two hundred of one sort or another' (*LJ* VI. 66) was the total by late 1818 – though there

were two mistresses who were much more than one-night stands: Marianna Segati (October 1816–February 1818) and Margarita Cogni (August 1817–April 1819). In mid-April 1817, he set off on another pilgrimage, this time through Bologna and Florence to Rome. 'As a *whole* – *ancient* & *modern* – it beats Greece – Constantinople – every thing – at least that I have ever seen' (*LJ* V. 221). He returned to Venice by the end of May, and began the fourth canto of *Childe Harold* at the end of June, just after the publication of *Manfred*. The poem was completed in a month and by the end of October he completed another remarkable transition, this time to the comic, vernacular, and digressive style of *Beppo: A Venetian Story*, published anonymously in February 1818 and a trial for the greatest poem of his career, *Don Juan*, which he started in July of that year.

When a schoolmate from Harrow made a genuine offer of £95,000 for Newstead in December 1817, these sexual and artistic resurgences were accompanied by a financial one. Claire's daughter, Allegra, had been born in England in January, and the 18-month-old child was delivered to Byron in June 1818 at his palazzo on the Grand Canal: 'very pretty – remarkably intelligent – and a great favourite with every body' (*LJ* VI. 62). As 1818 wore on his friends in England expressed concerns about *Don Juan* and its barely concealed references to Lady Byron, but its author was unapologetic. For the first time in his life he was also driving hard bargains with John Murray for his work. Byron's Venetian life came to a climax in the carnival of February 1819, when he suddenly took it upon himself to reform – a decision that was not overdue. The son of the family lawyer reported meeting him in November 1818: 'Lord Byron could not have been more than 30, but he looked 40. His face had become pale, bloated, and sallow. He had grown very fat, his shoulders broad and round, and the knuckles of his hands were lost in fat' (*LJ* VI. 78).

In April 1819, he became acquainted with the 19-year-old Teresa, Countess Guiccioli, up from Ravenna on a visit with her 58-year-old husband. Within days they were lovers. She was already pregnant, and on her trip home she miscarried. On 1 June, Byron followed her, and their affair deepened during his visit. In August, he followed the Guicciolis back to Bologna, then (with the Count's permission) returned to Venice with Teresa, having planned and abandoned an elopement. Byron continued work on *Don Juan* and gave his memoirs to his friend the Irish poet Thomas Moore, while the Count left his wife in Byron's care until November, when he returned to collect her.

Byron now came to a fork in the path of his relationship with Teresa. Her health was re-established, and he could step aside, for her sake as well as his own. He had thought of emigration to Venezuela with Allegra; then England seemed a possibility. But the threat of departure made Teresa ill again, and by