Roderick Beaton re-examines Lord Byron's life and writing through the long trajectory of his relationship with Greece. Beginning with the poet's youthful travels in 1809–11, *Byron's War* traces his years of fame in London and self-imposed exile in Italy that culminated in the decision to devote himself to the cause of Greek independence. Then comes Byron's dramatic self-transformation while in Cephalonia, from Romantic rebel to 'new statesman', subordinating himself for the first time to a defined, political cause in order to begin laying the foundations during his ‘hundred days’ at Missolonghi for a new kind of polity in Europe – that of the nation state as we know it today. *Byron's War* draws extensively on Greek historical sources and other unpublished documents to tell an individual story that also offers a new understanding of the significance that Greece had for Byron and of Byron's contribution to the origin of the present-day Greek state.

**RODERICK BEATON** is Koraes Professor of Modern Greek and Byzantine History, Language and Literature in the Centre for Hellenic Studies at King's College London.
Frontispiece. Theodoros Vryzakis (1819–78), *The Reception of Lord Byron at Missolonghi*, 1861, oil on canvas, 155 × 235 cm (Athens, National Gallery–Alexandros Soutzos Museum, inv. 1298, donated by the University of Athens. Photo: Stavros Psiroukis)
BYRON’S WAR

*Romantic Rebellion, Greek Revolution*

RODERICK BEATON
For what is poesy but to create
From overfeeling good or ill; and aim
At an external life beyond our fate,
And be the new Prometheus of new men,
Bestowing fire from heaven . . .

Lord Byron, *The Prophecy of Dante* (June–July 1819)

And I will war, at least in words (and – should
My chance so happen – deeds) with all who war
With Thought; – and of Thought’s foes by far most rude,
Tyrants and Sycophants have been and are.
I know not who may conquer: if I could
Have such a prescience, it should be no bar
To this my plain, sworn, downright detestation
Of every despotism in every nation.

It is not that I adulate the people:
Without me, there are Demagogues enough
... I wish men to be free
As much from mobs as kings – from you as me.

Lord Byron, *Don Juan, Canto ix* (August 1822)
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2. *Portrait of a Greek Wearing a Fustanela*, Louis Dupre, c.1830, oil on canvas, thought to depict Andreas Londos (Athens: Benaki Museum, Collection of Paintings, Drawings, and Prints)


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8b. Georgios Karaiskakis, by an unknown artist, oil on canvas (Athens: Benaki Museum, Collection of Paintings, Drawings, and Prints)

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MAPS

1. Byron’s Greece
2. Cephalonia, Missolonghi, and environs
Acknowledgements

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Greek names in the non-Greek sources for the period usually appear phonetically rendered into Italian. Thus ‘Karaiskakis’ becomes ‘Caraiscachi’. Where these forms occur in quotations I have retained them. Elsewhere I have regularised them in a manner more readily recognisable in English today, preserving so far as possible a balance between phonology and orthography.

The calendar in use in the Ottoman empire and Greece during the nineteenth century (known as Old Style) was twelve days behind the western European (New Style). Byron went ashore at Missolonghi on 5 January 1824, but in the Greek calendar this was 24 December 1823. Conventionally, dates at the period were written in the form ‘Old Style/New Style’, but this double system is rarely used in the sources drawn on in this book. In the main text I have harmonised all dates to New Style, occasionally adding a reminder of the local date. In the notes, the dates of documents are cited first as they appear in the document. In the case of Old Style dates, the New Style equivalent has been added in the form ‘/New Style’]. Where it has not been possible to determine which style applies, a ‘?’ has been added.

In the notes, frequently cited primary sources are indicated by the abbreviations listed on pages 273–6, all others by author’s name and short title. Full bibliographical references are listed at the end of the book.
Maps
Maps

Map 2. Cephalonia, Missolonghi, and environs
Late in the evening of Wednesday, 16 July 1823, an English coal brig named Hercules sailed from the port of Genoa. Aboard were a British peer of the realm, who happened also to be one of the most famous writers of his day, a Cornish adventurer, an Italian count, a Greek count, a doctor and a secretary (both Italian), half a dozen servants of several nationalities, five horses, two dogs, and a prodigious amount of money in silver coin and bills of exchange. Their destination was Greece. Revolution against Ottoman Turkish rule had broken out there two years before. Since then, horrific stories had been reaching Europe about extreme violence on both sides. None of those aboard the Hercules knew very much about the details of the conflict, not even who was in charge or what their policies were, except for the overriding one of liberation from tyranny. None had the least inkling of the political storm that was slowly breaking over Greece as they sailed, and would prove to be the last testing-ground for George Gordon Noel, the sixth Baron Byron, whose story this is.

Byron, by the summer of 1823, ‘mad, bad, and dangerous to know’, had single-handedly invented the modern cult of celebrity. He was adored and reviled throughout Europe, and as far away as America, as one of the defining spirits of the Romantic movement in poetry and the arts. He had just received the highest praise possible for a writer at the time, a letter expressing warm admiration for his work from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the revered poet and intellectual of the age. So, what made Byron decide at the age of thirty-five to risk everything by going to join the revolution in Greece? What impact did his coming have on the course of Greece’s modern history? Why does it matter today?

The answers to these questions make a compelling story. It is a story that has never been told in full before. This may seem extraordinary when something over 200 biographies of Byron are already in existence. Since Harold Nicolson published Byron: The Last Journey in 1924, to mark the centenary of its subject’s death, almost every conceivable aspect of Byron’s
Prologue

Life and work has been turned over by scholars, travel writers, and celebrity hunters. The Greek ‘adventure’ has proved no exception, and important studies published over the last forty years have brought more modern perspectives to bear.¹ But only Stephen Minta, in three important articles so far, has begun to explore the rich resources of the Greek historical archives which provide an essential understanding of the political context in which Byron found himself in Greece in 1823 and 1824.²

Nicolson began his tale in the spring of 1823, on the eve of the departure of the Hercules from Genoa. But Byron’s decision for Greece was not the result of the whims and pressures of the moment. The ground had been laid years earlier, during his ‘Grand Tour’ to the eastern Mediterranean from 1809 to 1811 and its aftermath. The traces of this story are there: in letters, in records of conversations, above all in the poetry – once memorably described by Byron as ‘the lava of the imagination whose eruption prevents an earth-quake’.³ Many of the moments and characters that make up this story will be familiar in themselves. But they have never before been joined up to reveal the course of Byron’s long and often unexpected trajectory that would take him from the Romantic rebelliousness of his most famous poems to political action in the cause of a revolution, in Greece.

That is the first part of the story. The second tells what Byron actually did once he got there, how his high-profile involvement was understood at the time by the people he had gone to help, and the effect he had on the outcome of the Greek Revolution. Much new primary material is now available, particularly in Greek. New interpretations by Greek historians, during the last ten years or so, have largely overturned many of the stereotypes of the past – including the conspiracy theory that Byron and other philhellenes went to Greece as the baleful agents of foreign powers – and opened the way to a much more nuanced understanding of the political forces at work during the crucial years of the Revolution when Byron was there.⁴ Byron himself does not yet figure as largely in this revisionist thinking as he probably deserves to. To that extent, the second part of this book offers a modest contribution to the revision of history going on in Greece today.

Seen from this perspective, the story of Byron in Greece turns out to be much more than the familiar set of anecdotes reported by those who were with him at the time. Pietro Gamba, Leicester Stanhope, William Parry, Dr Julius Millingen, and later Edward Trelawny, all published blow-by-blow accounts of Byron’s last months. But none of them had much idea of the internal dynamics of the revolution they were there to serve. George Finlay, who did, and who would go on to write one of its most
authoritative histories, mostly kept his private recollections to himself. Much of the material that makes up the second half of this book has never been available in English before. A good deal of it remains unpublished. Taken together with the landmarks familiar from the biographies, it adds up to a quite different understanding of the political maelstrom into which Byron found himself catapulted, and his own, tragically uncompleted, contribution to the eventual outcome of the conflict.

This is the story of Byron's remarkable achievement in inventing and reinventing himself – first in imagination as the rebellious Childe Harold and the doomed heroes of the 'oriental tales', then as the 'new Prometheus of new men', who would eventually settle on the revolution in Greece as the cause to which he would devote his final transformation – into the embryonic statesman and political leader of his last months in Cephalonia and Missolonghi. But it is not the story of one man only. Others – notably his fellow-poet Shelley – played a crucial part in bringing Byron to commit himself to Greece. The role of the Greek aristocrat from Constantinople, Alexandros Mavrokordatos, with whom Byron would forge a crucial alliance in Greece, has not been fully appreciated until now. Finally, thanks to that alliance and the effect that Byron had on the internal politics of the Greek Revolution, the story of this 'new Prometheus' forms part of the story of how Europe, including liberated Greece, became modern.