



The Reception of Lord Byron at Missolonghi (Η υποδοχή του Λόρδου Βύρωνα στο Μεσολόγγι)
by Theodoros Vryzakis

When the poet Lord George Gordon Byron (born in London, on January 22nd, 1788) began publishing his travel epic, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, in 1812, its world-weary narrator captured the mood of a post-Napoleonic world. Though Byron denied it, the protagonist also represented his author: "...proud, moody, cynical, with defiance on his brow, and misery in his heart, a scorner of his kind...yet capable of deep and strong affection."¹ In this exhausted spirit we find the seeds of Byron's affection and hope for a Greece still suffering under the Ottoman Empire:

*In all save form alone, how changed! and who
That marks the fire still sparkling in each eye,
Who would but deem their bosom burned anew
With thy unquenched beam, lost Liberty!
And many dream withal the hour is nigh
That gives them back their fathers' heritage:
For foreign arms and aid they fondly sigh,
Nor solely dare encounter hostile rage,
Or tear their name defiled from Slavery's mournful page.²*

¹ [Macaulay, Thomas Babington, Baron. Critical, Historical and Miscellaneous Essays. 1894, p. 359.](#)

² [Byron, George Gordon. Childe Harold's Pilgrimage \(Canto II, Stanza LXXV\), Project Gutenberg.](#)

For Byron, the passing years would increase not only his output and fame, but also his personal scandals. In 1816 Byron left England for good, spending time in Italy with fellow poets Mary & Percy Bysshe Shelley, and generally living the kind of life that produced works like *Don Juan*.

Despite misgivings at allowing Muslim Ottomans to continue the subjugation of Greek Christians, the European Great Powers saw no need for more world revolution after Napoleon. They, “denounced the Greeks as rebels, and ignored them.”³ Since it then fell to private support, the London Philhellenic Committee was established in 1823, and naturally, elected Lord Byron as one of its members. Not to content to wait, he arrived in Cephalonia on August 3rd, 1823. Tensions between rival groups vying for power meant that it was not until November 3rd that he committed four-thousand pounds to the Greek fleet, allying himself with Prince Alexandros Mavrokordatos. Byron was greeted in Missolonghi as a hero, but it would prove short-lived.

Only a month later infighting among his unpaid troops, and the London Committee’s failure to properly fund the campaign had made such an arrival a memory. Through it all though, Lord Byron remained steadfast. “*Whatever I can accomplish with my income, and my personal exertions, shall be cheerfully done. When Greece is secure against external enemies, I will leave the Greeks to settle their government as they like. One service more... I think I may perform for them... have a schooner built for me, or I will buy a vessel; the Greeks shall invest me with the character of their ambassador, or agent: I will go to the United States, and procure that free and enlightened government to set the example of recognising the federation of Greece as an independent state. This done, England must follow the example, and then the fate of Greece will be permanently fixed, and she will enter into all her rights as a member of the great commonwealth of Christian Europe.*”⁴ His hoped-for recognition would come, but not until 1837, 13 years after his death.

After a chill grew into a fever, a controversial bloodletting procedure ultimately led to his death on April 19th, 1824, the feast of Pascha. “...thousands of the inhabitants of Missolonghi had assembled...to exchange the salutations of the morning; but on this occasion it was remarked, that instead of the wonted congratulations, “Christ is risen,” they inquired first, “How is Lord Byron?”⁵

The manner of Lord Byron’s life, and his writings have long made him both a respected and controversial figure in literature. However, in dying a martyr’s death for the country that had fed his own creativity, he effectively intertwined himself and Greece for all time. The man who gave much of his fortune, and his life for a foreign land, “...is still revered as no other foreigner, and as very few Greeks, and like a Homeric hero he is accorded an honorific standard epithet, *megalos kai kalos*, a great and good man.”⁶ Not even in his native country where he was buried in Poets Corner of Westminster Abbey can it be said that boys are named after the poet, but to this day Βύρωνας, Vyronas is still a first name for young men in Lord Byron’s adopted homeland.

³ Woodhouse, Christopher Montague. *The Philhellenes*. [Madison, N.J.]: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1971, p. 66.

⁴ [Galt, John. *The Life of Lord Byron. 1832. Chapter 46*](#)

⁵ [Ibid. Chapter 48](#)

⁶ Brewer, David. *The Greek War of Independence: The Struggle for Freedom and from Ottoman Oppression*. Abrams Press, pp. 215–19.