

LORD BYRON AND NEWSTEAD

John Beckett (with Sheila Aley)

Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2002. (pp.347)

ISBN 0-87413-751-9.



Circa 1880.

This book is superb and indispensable, replacing in its professionalism all other essays at the same subject. Doris Langley Moore's *Lord Byron: Accounts Rendered* may give more of what one might call the human background; but John Beckett's book does not neglect the human factor, and gives, in its thoroughness, many more of the historical and economic facts.

Had Byron inherited Newstead Abbey and its estate in due time, directly, as eldest son, as opposed to unexpectedly and indirectly, as great-nephew, he might have found it much harder to sell. The laws protecting the English aristocracy from its own well-documented propensity to self-destruct were so tight as to make the sale of one's landed inheritance virtually impossible; and until the 1920s poverty-stricken families which, had they been other than lordly, would never have been able to remain solvent in terms of land, almost always survived with their estates intact. Land could not be settled in perpetuity, and the sacred idea that aristocratic families owned it continuously, was, in legal terms, a fiction. The owner was restricted to a life-tenancy of the estate, which was ensured for future generations by periodical entails and re-settlements, so that no single owner could split it up or dispose of it. Such an estate was described as a "settled" one. Certain items were excluded, and could be sold, such as timber, and domestic moveables: the "Wicked" Fifth Lord, Byron's great-uncle, was unscrupulous in raising money this way.¹ But a group of appointed trustees always made sure that the law relating to *land* was not violated: for the sale of one's inherited landed estate constituted treason to one's class – one might sell it to some parvenu tradesman! One never sold it, and the law made sure that in any case one could never sell it, much as one might want to, or need to. Land might be one's major capital asset, and one might have it in abundance: but one could not dispose of it. So, if one's tastes inclined towards the extravagant, serious cash-flow problems followed, as the night the day.

Newstead, however, was not a "settled" estate. Owing to an error on the part of the "Wicked" Fifth Lord's lawyers in 1773, the Sixth Lord Byron – the poet – inherited it, not as a life tenant, as was usual, but as owner of the fee simple: that is, it was his absolute possession. With the death at the siege of Calvi of the "Wicked" Lord's grandson, William John Byron (on July 31st 1794), the "Wicked" Lord thought that *he* would regain the fee

1: He sold the great picture collection which, containing as it did works by Rubens, Canaletto, Holbein, Van Dyke and Titian (Beckett 44), would have made Newstead closer in magnificence to Norman Abbey in *Don Juan*.

simple, and thus control of the future of Newstead; instead, he found that the estate was to go to the next male heir within the extended family – namely, the poet, who was the grandson of his younger brother, Admiral “Foul Weather” Jack.

W.S. Hasleden had worked in the chambers of John Hanson, lawyer to both the Fifth (“Wicked”) and Sixth (Poetical) Lords Byron. In 1853 he recalled:

Upon the marriage of his son, he [*the “Wicked” Fifth Lord*], as any other father would do, granted a settlement of his property, including the Newstead Abbey estate; but by some unaccountable inadvertence or negligence of the lawyers employed, the ultimate reversion of the fee-simple of the property, instead of being left, as it ought to have been, in the father as the owner of the estates, was limited to the heirs of the son. And upon his death, and failure of the issue of the marriage, the unfortunate father, *this eccentric lord*, found himself robbed of the fee-simple of his own inheritance, and left merely the naked tenant for life, without any legal power of raising money upon it, or even of cutting down a tree.²

The law was afterwards changed, to make such disasters impossible; but in this case the lawyers’ error meant, firstly, that the Poetical Lord would be able to borrow money using Newstead as security, and secondly, that he would be able to sell it, in 1817, in defiance of tradition, without legal difficulty, to pay off his massive debts.

People knew about this strength on the part of the Poetical Lord, and his extravagance plus their willing parasitism turned it quickly into a weakness, for as soon as he reached Cambridge in October 1805, he had no scruples about running up huge debts – £1,000 by the end of his first term! It was on the understanding that he would soon come into great wealth – wealth which he would have the power to dispose of, which the average noble scion could never possess – that the unwise Mrs Elizabeth Massingberd not only gave her signature as collateral security on his borrowings in London, but persuaded him to borrow £3,000 on her behalf.

Lending money to Byron was not quite as foolish as lending money to Coleridge. In Coleridge’s case it became obvious after a time that you’d *never* see your cash again; but even in Byron’s case you must have thought as much from time to time, in the short run. In May 1808, Scrope Davies – another dangerous liver, deeply in debt himself – had been naïve enough to stand guarantor, with Mrs Massingberd, for a loan to Byron of the £4,500 which enabled him to go abroad in 1809. Davies lost sleep over the friendly gesture for years to come.

Byron, not having grown up at Newstead, was under disadvantages from which a “normal” heir would not have suffered. He knew nothing of the estate when he inherited it, he was not intimate with the tenant-farmers, and he had not witnessed the day-to-day running of the place at the knee either of an experienced and benevolent father, or at that of a professional estate-manager. Indeed, for much of the time, the delapidated state of the Abbey meant that he and his mother had, as we all know, to live either in Nottingham or Southwell. And if Newstead was neglected, his other important estate, in Rochdale, was even more so.

On his coming of age, the date (January 22nd 1809) from which he had absolute ownership, a huge party was thrown at Newstead. Five hundred local people attended, an ox was roasted, six sheep consumed, and six hogsheads of ale and 150 gallons of punch drunk. But Byron was absent. He dined that day in London, on “eggs and bacon and a bottle of ale”.³

His proposed solution to the problem of his debts seemed obvious, and easy: now he was of age, he would take out a mortgage on the estate, pay off all his creditors at once, and then repay the mortgage out of estate income. To arrange the mortgage became an urgent matter, for now he was no longer a minor, the creditors, both at Newstead and in London, pressed him personally, so that he was “dunned from morn till twilight”.⁴ But John Hanson, his

2: *N&Q* 8, no. 192 (July 2nd 1853), 2; quoted Beckett 81, n67, for which see Beckett 308.

3: BLJ X 52; quoted Moore’s *Life* (1830) I 158; quoted Beckett (116 n2) as “Boyes, *My Amiable Mamma* 145”.

4: It was at this time (March 1809) that Byron invited Hobhouse, Matthews and company to Newstead, and at this time that they played at monks, and drank Burgundy from a skull-cup.

lawyer, could not, it seems, raise the mortgage. Why not, is unclear: it remains one of the most annoying enigmas in the story. Wartime difficulties *may* have been a contributory factor. Perhaps the estate was too run-down. Perhaps Hanson just didn't try hard enough. Trying hard seems never to have been in Hanson's style. Instead, he negotiated a loan of £6,000 from Colonel Wanley Sawbridge (a friend of his partner, John Birch), of which he used £3,000 to pay off annuities, leaving only half the sum to Byron.

The by now heavily-indebted Byron started making arrangements for going abroad, using Scrope Davies's money, and left on July 2nd 1809. Hanson thought his going irresponsible. It was, he wrote,

... a source of regret to me that Lord Byron was determined to go abroad at this critical juncture, and more particularly before he had perfected that arrangement that was necessary for the settling of his affairs.⁵

While abroad, Byron was conned by English agents into being debauched by Ali Pasha, and wrote *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, with its vision of a fantasy-Newstead:

The Childe departed from his father's hall:
It was a vast and venerable pile;
So old, it seemèd only not to fall,
Yet strength was pillared in each massy aisle.
Monastic dome! condemned to uses vile!
Where Superstition once had made her den
Now Paphian girls were known to sing and smile;
And monks might deem their time was come agen,
If ancient tales say true, nor wrong these holy men.

If only the Abbey had been as imposing, and life in it as interesting, as that. The reality, while Byron lived elsewhere – that is, for most of the time – is summed up in a letter his mother wrote to John Hanson:

I have not seen Newstead myself but I must inform you that almost every Person I meet informs me of the shameful state it is in, all the county talks of it and says its is quite a disgrace for any Person in the character of a *Gentleman* to keep a place in such a *Beastly* state (that was the expression that was used). The *new* windows in the long dining room have *disappeared* so I am told but all that must be looked after before his Lordship leaves the place.⁶

Things were no better in Lancashire:

A Lady who lives in this place whose father has an Estate near Rochdale just gives me exactly the same account, she says the mismanagement of Lord Byron's property there has long been the subject of conversation and astonishment to all the Noblemen and Gentlemen in the County of Lancashire, and that those who have the management of my Son's affairs are greatly censured and blamed for permitting a minor to be so plundered.⁷

It was while Byron was abroad that Hanson suggested, for the first time, selling Newstead, as opposed to mortgaging it: "Land," he wrote, "sells very well at this time".⁸ But Byron would not countenance the idea, even though Hanson wrote further, "I fear both Davies and Madam Massingberd must go to gaol".⁹

It was while Byron was abroad that his mother moved into Newstead, and evinced more compassion for the human consequences of her son's financial irresponsibility than ever he

5: Quoted Beckett 145.

6: Egerton 2611, quoted *Accounts Rendered* 81; *Mamma*, 134.

7: Egerton 2613, quoted *Accounts Rendered* 92.

8: Quoted Beckett 314.

9: Quoted Beckett 143.

did. Of a Nottingham joiner called Farnsworth, whom Byron owed approximately £300, she wrote:

The poor man would have had all his goods sold or been put in Prison which would have been his utter ruin, and I have not that stoical indifference in my disposition to hear of such scenes without doing something for the relief of the Person if in my power particularly as my Son was the cause of it.¹⁰

A painter from Mansfield was owed £339 5s 1d. A Nottingham upholstery firm was owed £1,600.¹¹ The gamekeeper, whose wife had just given birth, had had no wages: to pay him, Mrs Byron borrowed ten pounds from her own maid.¹² She was so generous that, by mid-December 1810, the balance of the estate account at Smith's Bank in Nottingham stood at 2s 1d. Being Byron's mother was no fun:

He knows I am doing every thing in my power to pay his Debts and he writes to me about hiring Servants and the last time he wrote to me was to desire me to send him £25.0.0. to pay his Harrow Bills which I would have done if I had had as much as he has – three hundred – I am glad I did not, but it shows what he is, God knows what is to be done with him. I much fear he is already ruined; at eighteen!!! Great God I am distracted I can say no more.¹³

In May 1811, Mrs Massingberd was arrested. In the same month, the bailiffs moved in to Newstead Abbey. On July 14th, Byron came home from abroad. In John Murray, he found a publisher for *Childe Harold*, but he gave the copyright to his cousin, R.C.Dallas. Noblemen did not write for money – or so he asserted, at first.¹⁴

On August 1st, Mrs Byron died. The devastated Byron wrote a new will, ensuring that Newstead would not be sold unless money from the sale of his other estates proved inadequate to pay his debts, and that Newstead would pass on to his nearest male relative, his cousin, George Anson Byron.

He was now £20,000 in debt; but although his capital assets far exceeded what he owed, he was as unable to realise them as if his inheritance had been a "settled" one after all. A further attempt, on his part, not Hanson's, to raise a mortgage on Newstead, produced no results.

Byron returned to Newstead at intervals, and two consequences were at least one illegitimate child, and his love affair with Susan Vaughan, Queen of the "Paphian girls".

Then, in February 1812, *Childe Harold* was published, the course of Byron's life determined for good, and Newstead's doom sealed. In no way could the life of a romantic poet and curled social darling be reconciled with that of a conscientious landowner. From this time onwards, the management and affairs of the Abbey estate descended into chaos. Hanson took less and less interest in it, and Owen Mealey, the bailiff, referred to locally as "the gardener", was "always *stupid* with ale"¹⁵ and commanded no-one's respect.¹⁶

The inevitable happened. On August 14th 1812, Hobhouse recorded the following in his diary:

... went to Garroway's Coffee House to the sale of Newstead Abbey by auction by a Mr Farebrother, where, having first secured myself with Byron, I bid twelve times and left off at 113,000 guineas for the large lot, which was brought in at 115,000 guineas – Byron having fixed

10: Quoted Beckett 147; *Accounts Rendered* 130.

11: Moore (1830 *Life*, I 272) writes, erroneously, that it was the first sight of this enormous bill which brought about the fit which caused Mrs Byron's death.

12: *Mamma*, 158; *Accounts Rendered* 124.

13: *Mamma*, 123.

14: So far as I can ascertain in the face of imperfect records, Byron received payment for every Murray publication except *Childe Harold I and II* and *The Corsair*. Dallas received £500 for the former and £600 for the latter.

15: Mrs Byron's phrase: Egerton 2611, quoted *Accounts Rendered* 76 and 124.

16: Mealey "had nearly £100 a year and a house" (*Accounts Rendered* 55).

£120,000 as the price. The second was brought in at 13,000 guineas. Never having done the like before, I was, before the thing began, in a complete fever – but was told by Hanson, Byron’s solicitor, that I came off most admirably: I had just then only one pound one shilling and sixpence in the world.¹⁷

No-one was quite interested enough in Newstead to go to Byron’s price for it. But 115,000 guineas would have settled all his debts, paid Hanson, and left enough for Byron to invest and live on. In the final upshot, Newstead was to be sold for the substantially smaller sum of £94,500.

The story deepens at once into greater mystery and misery, for the morning after the attempted auction at Garroway’s, Byron received an offer for Newstead which stood at £140,000 – about £20,000 *more* than the unsuccessful bid on the previous day, and £45,500 *more* than what he would eventually make on the property! (In fact, £140,000 was a ridiculous and quite unrealistic price.) It *seemed* his troubles were over; but if anything in his life might teach him that human expectations were doomed always to be answered by anti-climax and long-drawn-out disappointment, it was this boost to his hopes: for the bidder was a Lancashire lawyer called Thomas Claughton,¹⁸ who hovered, as a Nemesis, around the poet’s life for the next six Years of Fame, rendering it a morass of alternating doubt, confidence, uncertainty, hope and despair.

If Claughton had been able to pay on the nail, Byron would have had the security to go abroad earlier than he did. He might have purchased a more modest estate nearer London. He would have not have needed to marry a Golden Dolly, and might thus not have destroyed himself by proposing (through the post) to the woman who was of all women the least well-equipped to be married to him.

But Claughton did not have the £140,000, never had it, never completed his purchase of Newstead, and strung Byron along through years and up-and-down years of wretchedness. The details are so dull, confused, depressing and stupid that they are best kept in a note;¹⁹ what we are interested in is the effect it all had, firstly on Byron, secondly on Newstead.

17: B.L.Add.Mss. 56530 ff. 53v.-54r.

18: Of Haydock Lodge, near Warrington.

19: Claughton’s offer of £140,000 (*Accounts Rendered* 197 says it was made two weeks after the Garroways auction: BLJ II viii says the following day) was accepted. Claughton bought the estate in August 1812 for £140,000, with an agreement to pay £20,000 by way of deposit (£10,000 by 31 October 1812 and £10,000 by 25 December) and a further £60,000 in instalments by August 1815. On 31st October 1812 Byron’s account with Hoares records a payment of £5,000 from “Claughton & Parr & Co & Dorien & Co” and on 19th and 27th July 1813, two payments “By T Claughton” of £7,500 each. The final £60,000 was to remain on a mortgage, on which Claughton was to pay interest. Only when he had paid the first £80,000 was he to have “possession”; this was supposed to happen on March 25th 1813.. On paying the £5,000 in October 1812, he questioned Byron’s “title” to the Newstead estate – on 24th May 1813 Byron wrote of him as a “scoundrel” (BLJ III 29). This problem was not resolved until June 1813 (hence the two further payments of £7,500 each in July 1813, to complete the £20,000 pounds – Claughton completed the deposit seven months late). Meantime, during the first half of 1813, Byron had no income.

After July 1813 the transaction with Claughton remained on course, and in spring 1814 he made two further payments, one of £5,000 and one of £3,000 (these appear in the Hoare’s credits as ten separate bills paid between May 28th and June 21st).

But then there was a major falling out between Byron and Claughton. In July 1814 Claughton, whose wife had born a son on 8th January, said that he would have to withdraw, and asked for a meeting with Byron’s solicitors (BLJ IV 139-43). With the payments now behind schedule, Hanson negotiated for Claughton to do so – hence the forfeiture on 20th August 1814, when Byron signed the papers which freed Claughton from his contract: he forfeited £25,000 (BLJ IV 150, 152, 190, 216, 258). However, Claughton saw this merely as a prelude to renegotiating the contract at a lower price (since he had offered too much in the first place), and in autumn 1814 Byron gave him this option – see Byron’s letter to him of 4th September and 1st October 1814 (BLJ IV 165-6 and 188) speaking as if his purchase is still a possibility. On 8th December 1814, a month before their marriage, Byron told Annabella that Claughton’s final offer of £92,000 had been refused, but in fact it was accepted (with

Byron was driven to distraction by his experience with Claughton. On July 19th 1814 – shortly before what seemed to be relief arrived, as we shall see – he wrote to Hanson:

If Mr. Claughton will give 25-000 – or even 20-000 – I will close with him – & take back the estate – so much am I convinced that he is a man of neither property nor credit. – He has never *once* kept his word since the sale was concluded – and at all events I will do anything to be rid of him – so tell him in what words you please – for such I appeal to you if he has not proved himself – without faith – & as far as I can perceive without funds. – *You* will cling & cling to the fallacious hope of the fulfilment – already shown to be so – till I am ruined entirely – in short it was a pity to let him go out of town again – without a conclusion – it was only to gain time – *close* with him on any terms – and let us have done with the equivocator. – – Pray think of Rochdale – it is the delay which drives me mad – I declare to God – I would rather have but ten thousand pounds clear & out of debt – than drag on the cursed existence of expectation & disappointment which I have endured for the last 6 years – for 6 months longer – though a million came at the end of them ...²⁰

It's Macbeth writing to Lady Macbeth, after they've reigned a couple of months. Claughton is the "equivocator" – "the fiend that lies like truth", who promises peace of mind but brings only sleeplessness and turmoil. Byron is his (innocent) victim.

Claughton was not a witch, but something worse: he was a property-speculator. He *may* have been so confident because he anticipated a rise in land prices as soon as the war was over and government stocks fell. He *may* have been interested in Newstead's coal-mining potential. Alas, we have no documents which enable us to read his mind: he may just have been short-sighted and incompetent; though his behaviour seems to indicate he knew what he *trying* to be about.

The fact that Claughton never became official lord of the manor did not prevent him from moving in to Newstead speedily, and throwing his weight about, as if he had. Soon after his offer had been accepted, in August 1812, he went there, and stopped Joe Murray – the housekeeper, loveable repository of all the Newstead legends – from packing up some glass

amendments) and negotiations continued until April 1815. On 11th February 1815 (BLJ IV 270) Byron wrote to Hobhouse that Claughton was about to complete: see also letter to Hanson, 18th February (BLJ IV 273). On 26th March 1815, Byron told Claughton that he felt free to look elsewhere for purchasers. In April Byron and Hanson finally broke with Claughton and put Newstead back on the market. After it failed to sell, Claughton came back with a further offer, to rent the house and home farm until he could afford to buy the estate, and to buy all the furnishings in the house. Byron agreed to this, but there is no evidence in the Hoare's account of when he paid any money. On 13th October 1815 Annabella reported a plan whereby Claughton was to have the furniture of Newstead for £1,200, and to take the house for a rent (*Lord Byron's Wife* 320); and there are letters in the Murray Archive from mid-1815, late 1815, and even February and March 1816, indicating that the people on the estate still don't know who's in charge, and are complaining of *Claughton's* neglect. Byron wrote from Geneva on 28th August, doubting – as if the matter were still in contention – whether Claughton would be able to resume the purchase (BLJ V 89). Eventually, when Newstead was again put on the market in 1817, Claughton offered to meet any price which might be offered, but was, at last, ignored.

On 1st February 1814 (BLJ IV 43-4) Byron mentions to Hanson the rumour that Claughton is not the real purchaser, but is merely the agent for Chandos Leigh (1791-1850) the poetaster and Holland House associate of himself and Hobhouse; but the rumour is never repeated. Claughton was married to the illegitimate daughter of Thomas Legh (sic) from Lyme, Lancashire, and the name may have been misunderstood when overheard.

Byron received the news of the sale of Newstead to Thomas Wildman on December 10th 1817. Hanson arrived in Venice, with the purchase papers, on 11th November 1818.

Claughton, who was MP for Newton, Lancashire, from 1818 to 1825, seems to have had a penchant for creating financial problems for himself and others. In 1816 he bought the reversion of the Cardiganshire estate from Thomas Johnes, but, as with Newstead, never completed; in 1821 he contracted for the purchase of the Bolesworth Castle estate in Cheshire. He was declared bankrupt on 5th March 1824, five weeks before the death of Byron, and again on 24th October 1838. He died in 1842. One of his sons was Bishop of Colombo (DNB, and R.G.Thorne, *The Commons* 1790 - 1820, Secker and Warburg 1986).

20: BLJ IV 143.

and linen for which Byron had asked, although such moveables had been specifically excluded from the contract. Claughton had wanted Byron to keep only the books and pictures, but had in the event to relinquish “the plate, linen, glass, books, fire arms, swords, sabres, pictures, wines and liquors of all sorts which the s^d Lord Byron reserves to himself”.²¹ Even so, this did not prevent him from breaking open the wine cellar, helping himself, and then putting a new lock on it. As the outraged Byron wrote to Hanson on October 10th 1813, “Claughton has *broken* open the *cellar*! – You must talk to him of this – I trust he has no more than a temporary possession – till he pays up the price”.²²

Claughton did not pay the estate workers as he should have, although he did send two of his pointers there to be looked after. He also sent furniture to the Abbey for storage, and paid Owen Mealey’s salary – at least up to February 1813 – although Robert Rushton’s and Joe Murray’s salaries were still being paid by Byron: each received £50 from him on 13th March 1813. Claughton installed an overseer called William Palin, an enemy of Owen Mealey:²³ he would allow Joe Murray nothing for expenses.

Also on his first visit, Claughton took a surveyor with him, and made, in the words of Hanson, “arrangements for ring fencing the estate with a nine foot stone wall[;] and planting seems to be the order of the day”.²⁴ Indeed, the wretched Mealey, uncertain which boss to obey, confirmed that Claughton had instructed him to “cut and thin the plantations, saying that he was “for planting a great deal this winter”.²⁵ Claughton was also for raising the rents as from Lady Day²⁶ 1813; but the tenant-farmers made difficulties, and in the event rents on only five of the farms were increased, and those on three were reduced. It made little difference to the estate income.²⁷ Two of the farmers – one of them Robert Rushton’s father – refused to agree to new terms at all.

Although he was still not legally in full possession, Claughton next attempted, as it were by way of revenge, a major reorganisation of the whole farmed area of the estate, with a view to reducing the number of farms from eight to seven, and to increasing the rent. On January 6th 1814 he put the lot under the hammer at The Hut, Mealey’s public house on the Mansfield Road, without telling the incumbent farmers in advance what he was doing. As a result of this more successful reorganisation, he was able to increase the rents to 26s per acre – well above the national average of 20.7s per acre. Byron affected to envy him his ruthlessness:

N[ewstea]d must bring about 120-000 – as it has been much improved – & the rents raised beyond what *I* could have done – because I should not have liked to turn out the old (though stupid) tenants – and all this has been effected.²⁸

For two days early in 1814, Byron and Claughton were together at Newstead: “Mr. Claughton,” Byron wrote to Lady Melbourne on February 6th, “has been with us during the last two days at N[ewstea]d & this day set off for Cheshire ...”²⁹ We have no idea what they said to one another.

A phantom relief came in August 1814, when Claughton was unable to maintain any longer the fiction that he had the capital to complete the purchase, and had to cough up the agreed forfeiture of £25,000. Byron, at least on paper, feigned delight. On August 3rd he wrote to Moore:

21: *Accounts Rendered* 197; BLJ II 190, 231, 234; Beckett 166.

22: BLJ III 138; Beckett 171.

23: Palin was the previous owner of The Hut, now Mealey’s pub, on the Mansfield Road.

24: Quoted Beckett 175.

25: Quoted Beckett 176.

26: Lady Day falls on March 25th.

27: Beckett 177.

28: Byron to Lady Melbourne, October 7th 1814: BLJ IV 199.

29: BLJ IV 47.

Newstead is to be mine again. Claughton forfeits twenty-five thousand pounds; but that don't prevent me from being very prettily ruined. I mean to bury myself there – and let my beard grow – and hate you all.³⁰

Byron hastened to Newstead on August 20th 1814, with Augusta and her children. His tone at this time, when writing both to and about Claughton, is amazingly gracious:

Dear Sir – / Whenever your business or leisure prompts you to visit this place you can take your choice if it's apartments[.] I will take care that they are ready for your reception. – The key of the cellar will be left with Murray so that I hope that you will not find it more uncomfortable than heretofore ...³¹ and so on.

It is not the tone of one writing to a speculator / equivocator who has ruined one's life.

Those tenant farmers who knew Byron welcomed him back, contrasting his patriarchal ways with those of the cold and cash-nexus-bound Claughton. To one farmer he said, getting out of his boat and shaking him by the hand, "Beardall you are one of the oldest friends I've got".³² It makes him sound like a charming version of Michael Henchard, and Claughton a charmless version of Donald Farfrae, from *The Mayor of Casterbridge*. But Byron did not bury himself on his manor, and did not turn into a bearded, misanthropic hermit as he had told Moore he would. He only stayed a month, and left on September 21st 1814: for it was while he was Newstead that he received Annabella's acceptance of his marriage proposal.

He never came back.

The sale of Newstead was written into the marriage settlement. This was strange: one didn't normally mark one's marriage by selling the family estate. Imagine Elizabeth's feelings if the first thing Mr Darcy did after their wedding was to sell Pemberly. Byron should have kept Newstead, for his children, and should have sold Rochdale: but he never even took Annabella to see it. Instead, he offered it to Claughton again, but Claughton now proposed to reduce his payment from £140,000 to £120,000, and Byron and Hanson both said no.

In the marriage settlement, Sir Ralph Milbanke, Byron's father-in-law, contracted to pay Byron £20,000. Byron assumed that he himself would be able to sell Newstead for £120,000, of which £60,000 – plus the £20,000 from Sir Ralph – would go into a trust fund, giving him and Annabella an income of at least £3,090 a year. However, neither man was able to meet his part of the agreement. Sir Ralph was unable to raise his twenty thousand,³³ and Byron was still not able to sell Newstead.

The wretched tale of his pre-exilic finances shows a fatal passivity on Byron's part, and, as far as Newstead goes, a fatal lack of conviction – even of interest – in his role as a landed aristocrat. As John Beckett writes, "Byron's touching faith in Claughton was much like his touching faith in Hanson".³⁴ To this we could add, "... and much like his touching faith in Sir Ralph Milbanke", or, "... much like his touching faith in the literary judgement of the myopic William Gifford," or, "... much like the faith of some of his Newstead tenants in him". He was an insecure amateur, squashed between professional sluggards and incompetents. Doris Langley Moore writes:

I do not think sufficient weight has ever been given to the effect, on a man who suffered from a sort of spiritual claustrophobia, of being caged in, as it transpired, for years by dependence on two unbusiness-like business men. His prolonged suspense as to the real extent of his resources gave to everything he did a feeling of transience, of unreality, so that he meandered into situations from

30: BLJ IV 152.

31: BLJ IV 165. Letter of September 4th 1814.

32: Quoted Beckett 182.

33: £9,800 of Annabella's portion was still unpaid at Byron's death (Beckett 254).

34: Beckett 189.

which he thought he could escape – hectic love affairs, proposals of marriage which were nothing but half-hearted gropings towards stability ...³⁵

Hobhouse – a practical friend – tried throughout 1815 to get an independent assessment of Hanson’s accounts;³⁶ but Hanson merely ignored all approaches, and no-one could do anything about him. Meanwhile, Claughton’s cattle still roamed the Newstead estate, “doing,” wrote poor Owen Mealey, “a great deal of injury to the farm than the ploughing and sowing will do good”.³⁷ Claughton’s agent Palin still affected to rule, and rents became harder and harder to collect. For his part, Sir Ralph Milbanke was unable to cough up a single penny of his portion of the marriage-settlement.

Throughout 1815, the first year of his marriage, Byron’s cash-flow problem became more and more acute. His being married to a well-known heiress increased the heat with which his creditors pursued him: but little did they know. Annabella applied to her solicitors for a loan, but received no answer. On July 28th they tried, again at Garroway’s Coffee House, to auction Newstead and Rochdale: both properties failed to reach their reserve prices, and had to be withdrawn.³⁸ Byron, now unfocussed, as the horror of what his marriage, too, had done to his life, dawned on him, could only curse Mealey, as if the whole thing were somehow his fault. But he didn’t sack him, even though people had been complaining about him since 1798. A sale of the Newstead house-contents was set up, but cancelled at the last minute when Claughton made yet *another* new offer, which he was no more able to follow up than he had his previous ones. The Newstead folk were in the midst of a major identity-crisis: to whom *were* they tenants?

On November 8th 1815, the bailiffs entered 13, Piccadilly Terrace; on January 15th 1816 Annabella left Byron; on Thursday April 25th 1816, Byron left England and never came back. At Newstead, bad weather and poor harvests made the tenants’ lives miserable, and lessened still further their capacity to pay the rents. Crops failed, and diseased sheep had to be slaughtered. Land prices – which had been expected to rise with the onset of peace – in fact sank.

The Newstead tale terminates, as we all know, happily – happily, that is, given the circumstances and personalities involved. A truly happy ending would have Byron holding on to his inheritance through thick and thin, going to Greece, surviving the War of Independence in triumph, and returning to England in the early 1830s, to a well-deserved retirement on his Nottinghamshire estate, and to finish *Don Juan*. Instead, in December 1817 Colonel Thomas Wildman put in a bid for Newstead (all 3,226 acres of it) for £94,500, and was accepted. In fact the trustees eventually received £97,972. Byron heard about the successful sale on December 11th 1817,³⁹ and signed the deeds on November 11th 1818 – the day he sent *Don Juan* Canto I to England.⁴⁰ Wildman acquired Newstead formally in February 1819.

In Stanza 216 of *Don Juan* I, Byron laments the extinction of his youthful passions:

My days of Love are over; me no more
The Charms of Maid, wife, and still less of Widow,
Can make the fool of which they made before;
In short, I must not lead the life I did do;
The credulous Hope of mutual Minds is o’er –

35: *Accounts Rendered* 204.

36: By Benjamin Winthrop of Lincoln’s Inn.

37: Quoted Beckett 199.

38: This was tried again on August 26th 1817, with the same result (Beckett 222).

39: BLJ V 277-9.

40: BLJ VI 76-8. It seems on this occasion to have been either Hanson *père* or Hanson *fil*s who told him that “Bob” Southey had been spreading rumours about him, and his “League of Incest” with Shelley, Mary Godwin, and Claire Clairmont.

The copious use of Claret is forbid too –

... but, he says, he has one passion still remaining, in which he must train himself:

So, for a good Old-gentlemanly Vice,
I think I must take up with Avarice.

He had little need of tuition. For the greater part of a decade, property, money, their control of him, and his inability to control them, had been a plaguey sore on his life. Now that he was free of financial worry, he became obsessed with finance – especially with others' financial obligations to him. As Professor Beckett puts it,

... he wanted those people who owed him money to be hounded into payment, while he was happy to jeopardize the financial arrangements of those to whom he himself owed money.⁴¹

He persecuted people mercilessly if they owed him money. Evidence of his attitude to such unfortunate or negligent men as Pietro Gamba is to be found elsewhere in this issue. His determination in prosecuting them to the limits of the law contrasts with his unwillingness, for instance, to believe in the dishonesty of Francis Boyce, the valet who got seven years' transportation in 1805 for stealing his clothes at Trinity College.⁴² On the other hand, it never ceases to amaze me that Byron's most conspicuous item of expenditure – his Napoleonic coach, made especially for him by Baxter in 1815 – was still unpaid-for in 1823.

But his lack of scruple here was unbalanced by a complete amateurishness elsewhere: committed avarice requires professional skill, and he simply didn't have the financial know-how to be an effective miser. John Beckett quotes his outrageous idea that his capital, post-Newstead, might be used as a loan to his estranged father-in-law, Sir Ralph;⁴³ he quotes Hobhouse's need to lecture Byron on the difference between the three per cents and the five per cents;⁴⁴ he quotes Byron's obsession with getting out of English government funds, on the imaginary grounds of an impending revolution.⁴⁵ Byron makes gestures of such vulgarity as trying to insure Annabella's life, on the grounds that if she dies his income from her late mother's estate at Kirkby Mallory will cease (but her life is assessed as uninsurable). Whether Doris Langley Moore is correct when she describes Byron as "literally unable to calculate",⁴⁶ it's a humiliating picture, complemented (as everything said or written about Byron has to be) by its opposite: namely his principled, systematic charity to the needy wherever he went. Avarice doesn't thrive on Christian compassion, and hand-outs to Italian beggars, or to Greek widows.

Under Major (later Colonel) Wildman, Newstead thrived. Wildman, *aide-de-camp* to Uxbridge at Waterloo and later equerry to the Duke of Sussex, was what the place had always needed: a resident owner, who believed in it, and in his own role in relation to it. He rationalised the estate, built new stone farmhouses (according to Washington Irving, at least), and gave everyone a new sense of security. He secured Joe Murray's place – just in time, for Joe Murray died in 1820. Not least important, though least-hymned of Wildman's deeds, was the decision to install water-closets in the Abbey itself: and the remainder of his committed restoration work – £100,000 worth – is with us today. After Byron's death the Abbey became

41: Beckett 244.

42: See BLJ I 79.

43: Beckett 246.

44: Ibid 245. It depends on the price you buy in at. If you had, say, £100 and bought 3 per cent annuities you would probably get more for your capital (say £150 worth in paper money) than from the 5 per cents which might only give you (say) £100 worth. Thus 3 per cent on £150 is £4.50, and 5 per cent on 100 is £5. These are obviously made-up figures, but the principle they work to is the one Kinnaird was complaining about Byron not understanding.

45: Ibid 247.

46: *Accounts Rendered* 110.

a shrine to his memory – with what justice, no-one asked, any more than they asked with what justice he was buried in the family vault of an estate which he had sold. Wildman was happy to encourage such a-historical fantasies.

One point which will be forever undecided is this: was Wildman encouraged in his renovations by Byron's description of "Norman Abbey" in *Don Juan* Canto XIII? Or was Byron, hearing about the excellent work Wildman was doing there, anxious to give him a parallel dream to emulate when he wrote, for instance,

A glorious remnant of the Gothic Pile
 (While yet the Church was Rome's) stood half-apart
In a grand Arch which once screened many an aisle;
 These last had disappeared – a loss to Art;
The first yet frowned superbly o'er the Soil,
 And kindled feelings in the roughest heart
Which mourned the power of Time's or Tempest's march,
In gazing on that venerable Arch. –

Within a niche, nigh to its pinnacle,
 Twelve Saints had once stood sanctified in Stone –
But these had fall'n – not when the Friars fell,
 But in the war which struck Charles from his throne –
When each house was a fortalice, as tell
 The annals of full many a line undone –
The Gallant Cavaliers – who fought in vain
For those who knew not to resign, or reign.

But in a higher niche, alone, but crowned,
 The Virgin Mother of the God-born child,
With her Son in her blessed arms, looked round,
 Spared by some chance when all beside was spoiled;
She made the Earth below seem holy ground;
 This may be Superstition weak or wild,
But even the faintest relic of a Shrine
Of any worship wakes some thoughts divine.⁴⁷

It is "Superstition, weak or wild", for Newstead was never as beautiful as this – the Newstead Cavaliers were never Gallant,⁴⁸ and the faceless statue of the Virgin, what's left of it, has I think never possessed the charm to inspire this degree of reverence – not since the Civil War. Norman Abbey in *Don Juan* is as much a fantasy-Newstead as the "vast and venerable pile" of *Childe Harold*, with its Paphian girls, singing and smiling as the Nottinghamshire females never did. Byron perpetrates falsehoods upon Newstead Abbey in poetry with the same insouciance as he betrayed it in real life. Colonel Wildman, and subsequent generations, down to the present, have attempted to atone for him.

47: *Don Juan* XIII, Sts. 59-61 (my edition).

48: Sir John Byron was a Royalist general who went abroad with Charles II, having been ennobled by him in 1643. Eleanor, his wife, was said by Pepys and others to have been the Merry Monarch's seventeenth mistress.