

BYRON

Written by Nick Dear, directed by Julian Farino. BBC2, September 27th-8th 2003.

Well, he couldn't be portrayed as "the man who had it all but threw it away," for he was too broke ever to have had it all; he could never have been his age's answer to Robbie Williams, for his singing wasn't good enough, and peers didn't sing, at least not in public; he was never the first media personality, for you couldn't flash your personality about the way we can today via broadcasting and the Internet, when all you had was newspapers, pub-signs, and engravings of portraits.

The advance publicity was thus a mite duplicitous – but what else did you expect it to be in Mr Blair's world of sex-it-up, dumb-it-down and market it? Neither did we get the paedophilia, the absence of which was regretted in advance by one of those who trotted along with the publicity machine. Neither did we really get the "multiple scenes of enthusiastic sex, frenzied tongue-kissing and heaving incest" promised by another.

We get instead a modest but significant amount of poetry: Shelley reads bits from *Don Juan* Canto I, and Byron himself voices-over a couple of stanzas from *Childe Harold*, and from *Stanzas to Augusta*: he is indeed depicted – for the first time on the screen since the late sixties – as a writer; and thus the reason why we should find him interesting, him as opposed to the dozen-or-so randy men who figure in his, as in every historical period, is made a bit clearer.

Nick Dear assured me (on BBC Radio Nottingham, the day before the first episode went out!) that he'd seen none of the previous cinematic attempts at portraying Byron, with the exception of *Gothic* (which doesn't attempt an accurate portrayal of anyone). So when the Greek lady emerges from the sack and beams "Byron!" at her saviour, the fact that the only source for this idea is Frederick Raphael's BBC drama-documentary from the early eighties, must just show great minds thinking alike. That menagerie is familiar, too, as is the laudanum (see notes 27 and 33 below).

These details apart, Dear's claim seems true: unlike most previous screen versions, this one is *almost* new-minted from the original documentation. We have the first screen Hobhouse since Raymond Lovell in 1948; the first screen Lady Melbourne since Margaret Leighton in 1972 (when she had no scenes with Byron anyway, only with William Lamb); the first Augusta since 1948, when Linden Travers pressed foreheads together passionately with Dennis Price (she's never identified in that movie as Byron's sister, only as "Mrs Leigh"); and the first-ever screen E. J. Trelawny. The cinematically-overexposed summer of 1816 is ignored completely, even though all the characters needed for it are there except Polidori.

Ours being a correct age politically, in theory if not in fact, Fletcher figures often – has, indeed, the last shot all to himself – to emphasise the monstrous social disparities of the time. He falls asleep over *Childe Harold*, unable to bother with it. "****ing books!" he mutters, as he loads yet another trunk-full on to the carriage. His marriage to Ann Rood – his announcement of his desire for which is greeted by Byron with peals of hysterical laughter – is interrupted by Byron's anti-social desire to go abroad again, and Fletcher and Mrs Fletcher are forced to bid one another a sad, silent farewell in the kitchen, mere shadows of their supposed social superiors. Now and again he's seen polishing a miniature portrait of her. Whether Fletcher really was as big as the actor employed, we shall never know: and his Nottingham accent (he's the only character in the story born at Newstead) seems a bit generalised. It was hard to imagine this sturdy, sceptical Fletcher writing, as the real one did at Byron's death,

Please to Excuse all Deffects for I Scarseley Now what I either Say or Do for after 20 Years
Servies To My Lord he was More to me then a father And I am too much Distressed to now Give a
Correct Account of every Pertickeler which I hope to Do at my arrival in England

And we have half-sibling incest! Just when a lot of work on Augusta's letters in the Bodleian was leading me to the conclusion that it didn't occur! Skilful casting and excellent acting (Annabella – Julie Cox; Augusta – Natasha Little) ensure that we fully understand why

Byron might have preferred the one woman over the other: though the extraordinary lengths he's said to have gone to make his predilection plain, late in 1815, are skimmed-over – perhaps because if he did sit Augusta on his knee, kiss her, and tell Annabella to her face that Augusta was his preference, we'd lose sympathy with him.

The interpretation which has Annabella's love for Augusta as strong as her love for Byron, is mercifully ignored.

The enigma for me is still Augusta. Was she evil? innocent? just too subject to the mood of the moment, like Byron? was she calculating and manipulative? soppy? I'm half way through her letters to Annabella from Piccadilly Terrace, and I can't make up my mind. Probably she was all these, which would account for the hold she had over the man with whom in turn she was obsessed.

Our Greek friends will be delighted by Trelawny's bringing out the old chestnut about the Greek soldiers sending bullet-lead to the Turks in the Acropolis, to prevent them from knocking down a few Parthenon pillars and taking bullet-lead out of them. Excellent myth-making propaganda. But they won't like it at Missolonghi when Byron complains, "How do I turn a gang of bandits into an army?" Nor will they smile when Fletcher, having poured some of his master's blood down the drain, stares at the stars and mutters, "*****ing Greece!"

Jenny Beavan's costumes contribute hugely to the convincing effect.

There are some strange edits. Suddenly, Byron is swimming the Grand Canal, at night, unaccompanied, racing no-one, and holding a torch aloft with one hand. How he got there is a question the DVD may answer, for the TV version doesn't.

Jonny Lee Miller, though his features are a bit too *pointy* for Byron, makes a virtuoso job of portraying a man subject to non-stop mood-swings, often shifting expression several times in the same close-up with maximum conviction. Watch the scene in which, faced with the reality of fatherhood for the first time, he asks to see little Augusta Ada's feet. This is a highly successful performance.

Julian Farino's direction only calls attention to itself in one scene, in which a passionate altercation between Byron and Augusta is observed as if through a barred window, with the bars out-of-focus in the front of the shot, and we are made to feel (a) that they're trapped and (b) that we shouldn't be listening-in. Given Byron's obsession with prisons, we could have done with a bit more of such imaginative stuff.

In short, it's the longest, most complex, frankest and fairest depiction Byron has ever had on screen. He's never had so much time to himself; and only *The Bad Lord Byron*, with Dennis Price, has portrayed him as other than a monster. Better than the advance publicity suggested. All other attempts have been but daubs. Accept no substitutes.

Inaccuracies, and other points. Most of these seem to me legitimate, in the interest of narrative economy.

1. Hobhouse burns the memoirs in one single sheaf, everyone in the room agreeing that they can't be published "especially if they're true." *The memoirs were over ninety pages long, and were burned by Horton and Luttrell, Annabella's agents. Of those in the room, only Moore had read them.*
2. The editing makes it look as if Byron is snogging in public with one of his male Greek servants. *This would have been unthinkable. In fact his boyfriends were the pupils at the school attached to the Capuchin convent at Athens.*
3. Byron, Hobhouse in attendance, saves a Greek woman from being drowned in a sack. As she's released from the sack she names him with delight. *We have only the word of the Marquis of Sligo that the "sack" incident happened. Hobhouse had left for England. Sligo only implies that Byron and the woman knew one another.*
4. Byron and Hobhouse return home from Greece together. *Hobhouse left a year before Byron, most of whose homosexual relations occurred in his absence.*
5. Everyone addresses him as "George". *No-one did except his mother. He was either "M'Lord," "Byron," or "Albe."*

6. Murray turns down Hints from Horace. *He was never offered it. Cawthorne had it set up, but Byron withdrew it.*
7. Byron speaks to Scrope Davies as if only he, Scrope, knew the pleasures of gambling. *Byron was a fiend gambler – that’s how he lost much of his money.*
8. *He pronounces his name “Scroap,” instead of “Scroop,” which is the correct way.*
9. Byron seems to have domesticated a fox. *Not even Byron could domesticate a fox.* He also keeps an owl in a cage, and a lizard, and at one point throws a parrot out of the window because Annabella says it bit her. *He’s more likely to have thrown Annabella out of the window. Not since he shot an eagle and decapitated a goose on December 9th and 21st 1809 has he harmed a bird.*
10. Byron clips off some of the pubic hair of a girlfriend, as if for a collection. *This was not his habit.*
11. Moore has an English accent. *Moore had an Irish accent.*
12. Rogers is a tall, robust man. *Rogers looked like a corpse.*
13. Hobhouse joins the army and rises proudly to the rank of Captain. *Hobhouse was forced by his father to join, not the army, but the militia – used for quelling domestic disturbances only. He hated it, and left as soon as he could.*
14. Annabella finds Caroline Lamb naked on the bed one morning, and later discusses childbirth and other intimate matters with her. *The two were never that close.*
15. Hobhouse is slightly taller than Byron, and good-looking. *Hobhouse was short and ugly.*
16. When he’s become famous, Byron meets Hobhouse with his curl-papers in. *According to Captain Gronow – sole source for the rumour – he only wore them in bed.*
17. *“Leveson Gower” is pronounced not “Levversson Gour” but “Lewson-Gore.”*
18. Hobhouse and Byron travel to the wedding in Byron’s coach. *They went by public transport.*
19. At Seaham, Hobhouse apologises for Byron’s Bonapartism. *But Hobhouse was an even more fervent Bonapartist than Byron.*
20. Hobhouse is an M.P. by 1815. *He finally got in for Westminster in 1820.*
21. Shelley is pointed out to Byron at a Whig society gathering, where he has long hair making him look like Rouget de Lisle in Abel Gance’s *Napoleon*. *Shelley was never invited to Whig society gatherings. In fact, he was unknown.*
22. Shelley is discussing “some lost cause” with a Greek in 1815. *The Greek War of Independence didn’t start until 1821.*
23. Augusta tells Byron that he must “go to Yorkshire” and get married. *He was married in Durham.*
24. The Milbankes are shown sitting disconsolately with Christmas party hats on. *People didn’t celebrate Christmas that way then.*
25. *The comical sexual awakening of Annabella is another idea from the Frederick Raphael drama-documentary.*
26. On their honeymoon, Byron and Annabella walk by the sea. *Halnaby is not by the sea.*
27. Byron takes laudanum in Annabella’s company. *But he hid it away in a locked chest. The non-stop drinking of laudanum is done by Alex Jennings in Dread Poets’ Society.*
28. Clare Clairmont thrusts herself on Byron in 1815, before his marriage breaks up. *She wrote him a letter of self-introduction, and not until 1816, after his marriage had failed.*
29. As Annabella gives birth upstairs, Byron uses a sabre to smash wine glasses which seem to be arranged in a circle around him, and glued to the surface of the furniture (or are they glass candlesticks?). *He either fired shots at the ceiling with a pistol, or smashed the necks from bottles with a poker. No-one mentions a sabre.*
30. Byron expresses his hate for Annabella’s friend Mrs Curtin. *The friend he hated was Mrs Clermont.*
31. Hobhouse confronts angrily Byron with the imputation of sodomy. *Hobhouse was far too uptight to do anything of the kind.*
32. Byron and Augusta are snubbed at Lady Jersey’s ball. They’re all alone, although Mercer Elphinstone looks at them sadly as they leave. *Lady Jersey stood by them at the ball, and Mercer is said to have told Byron that he should have married her.*

33. In the Palazzo Mocenigo, Byron keeps an ostrich and a llama. *Dennis Price keeps two big cats. Hugh Grant keeps a giraffe. In fact Byron kept nothing (apart from his horses, which were stabled) larger than a dog.*
34. Byron writes *Stanzas to Augusta* in 1819. *He wrote it in 1816.*
35. He shows Shelley (now with short hair) the manuscript of *Don Juan* I, and Shelley reads it aloud. *In fact Byron read Shelley the proofs of Canto III. If they'd let Shelley read on one more stanza, he'd have recognised, in the Cheops lines, a joke against his own Ozymanidas.*
36. Byron and Margarita Cogni fornicate furiously in a gondola, with the curtains open. *They'd have been arrested. You drew the curtains, so that "none can make out what you say or do."*
37. Margarita learns to read English in order to understand Byron's memoirs. *She learned to read Italian in order to understand his love-letters.*
38. Margarita jumps into the canal from a first-floor balcony, just as Hobhouse arrives in a gondola. *She just jumped in from the bank, and Hobhouse wasn't in Venice.*
39. Hobhouse brings Byron the papers to sign for the sale of Newstead. *They were brought by John Hanson.*
40. In a Venetian church in 1819, Lady Liddell tells her daughter not to look at Byron. *It happened on the roof of St. Peter's, Rome, in 1817.*
41. Byron writes the letter about being "tired of promiscuous concubinage" to Augusta. *He wrote it to Kinnaid.*
42. By 1819, Hobhouse is a junior minister. *He didn't become a minister till after 1832.*
43. Byron tells Augusta that the Guicciolis' marriage was annulled. *It never was, though they did get two papal decrees of separation.*
44. Edward Elleker Williams has grey hair. *Williams was 29 when he died.*
45. "God, I miss the child!" says Byron on Allegra's death in the convent. *He hadn't visited her for over a year.*
46. As Shelley is cremated, Byron is sick, then goes for a swim with his boots on. *It was Leigh Hunt who felt ill, and no-one swims with their boots on if they can help it. As it's in long shot, no-one would notice that his feet weren't deformed. It was sunstroke got during the swim which made Byron ill.*
47. At Missolonghi, Tita Falcieri drills the troops. *Tita had no military training.*
48. At Missolonghi, Trelawny leaves to go and fight, to Byron's dismay. *Trelawny left Byron on Cephalonia. He and Byron were never at Missolonghi together alive.*
49. Trelawny tells Byron that the Greeks, besieging the Parthenon, sent bullets to the Turks within so that they wouldn't have to destroy any pillars to extract lead from them. *Greek historians assure us that this happened, but can never quote a source. Insurgents in the 1820s are unlikely to have known the supposed cultural value of the Parthenon.*
50. Trelawny says he's going north because he's never seen action. *He went south-west (to Tripoliza) and had seen plenty of action in the navy.*
51. *On the wall at Missolonghi, they've pinned a map of Italy.*
52. On his deathbed, Byron is bled with a lancet from the forearm. *He was bled with leeches from the temples.*
53. The upper lip of Byron's corpse is clean-shaven. *He'd grown a moustache.*

(P.C. 30/09/03).

In the week following transmission I attended a Byron Society meeting, and the unveiling of a plaque to Mary Shelley. At the Byron meeting, only one person had watched the programme, and had hated it. At the Mary Shelley meeting, several had, and all liked it. People are worried that, when the thing hits the shops in VHS and DVD, it will do Byron's public profile no good. How can we teach this wicked man in our schools, or even have societies in his honour? But he didn't have a public profile before this weekend – and no-one teaches him in schools anyway. People object to all the sex – but a Byron movie with no sex is like a John Wayne movie with no gunfire. (–P.C.)