

The Irish Avatar



George IV



Dublin Castle



George IV

Few monarchs can have been held in such contempt by his subjects as was George IV. A loose liver – unlike his chaste father – his adulteries were well-known; the further public knowledge that he was a wild spender, constantly having to be bailed out from the public purse, and a foolish, querulous personality to boot, with a blind political conservatism, all allied with his corpulence to create a very poor public image indeed. When, in 1820, this of all kings decided to put his wife, Caroline of Brunswick, on semi-trial for adultery, and when the case had to be withdrawn in embarrassment; when his queen became the focus of a massive political discontent which enveloped the disenfranchised middle-class and working-class up and down the land; when his Queen was excluded both from the Coronation Oath and from the ceremony itself; and when only a short while later she died, stoic but miserable, George’s reputation plummeted lower still.

Queen Caroline’s body was taken through the City of London on Thursday August 14th 1821, against the wishes of the Liverpool government, who didn’t want the world to know how popular she had been, and had lined the route with soldiers, rather to provoke violence than to contain it. Two men were killed by panicking troopers at Cumberland Gate. On August 15th there was a near-riot at Colchester, when more troops forcibly evicted Caroline’s friends from a church in which they had attempted to place a plaque on her coffin calling her “the injured Queen of England”. On August 16th her body was, with “maimed rites,” seen off from Harwich for its burial at in Germany.

While all this was happening, King George was in Ireland, having departed on August 11th. He didn’t attend his own wife’s funeral. He entered Dublin in state on the 17th, and left on September 3rd. His visit was marked with slavish adulation, enormous banquets, balls, fêtes, and parties, and massive crowds; he displayed a bunch of shamrocks in his hat. This less than a quarter of a century after the rebellion of the United Irishman in 1798, which had been put down by the English with appalling cruelty and atrocity, after what independence the country had had been taken away by the Act of Union of 1800, at a time when no Catholic had the vote (Catholics formed the greater part of the population), and when George was well-known to oppose Catholic Emancipation, was viewed by liberals as all very sycophantic, and a poor show indeed for Ireland.

The Irish Avatar was Byron’s riposte. It was written in Ravenna on September 16th 1821. He sent his Irish friend Thomas Moore a copy in Paris the following day, and twenty copies were printed there, and distributed by Moore. The *Examiner* printed it in 1822; Thomas Medwin printed it in his 1824 *Conversations*; but it was never officially published in Byron’s lifetime.

Jeffery Vail writes that Byron had been impressed by Moore’s *Lines on the Entry of the Austrians into Naples, 1821*, and had conceived the *Avatar* as a work in the same vein, attacking the servile Irish as Moore had attacked the capitulating Italians.¹ Moore had liked the *Avatar*, and had written in his journal, “Received Lord Bs. tremendous verses against the King & the Irish for their late exhibition in

1: Jeffery Vail, *The Literary Relationship of Lord Byron and Thomas Moore* (Johns Hopkins 2001), pp.73-74.

Dublin – richly deserved by my servile & hollow-hearted countrymen”.² Vail points out that the *Avatar* is, like Moore’s poem on the Austrians, written in anapestic quatrains, and that Byron had written to Moore, “As *you* could not well take up the matter with Paddy (being of the same nest, I have ...”³

Moore would have been less confident than Byron about taking such a virulently anti-Irish tone in a poem about George’s visit. We have here, therefore, the poem Byron thinks Moore would or should have written on the same subject.

At the 2005 Conference of the International Byron Society, held at University College Dublin, I noticed one speaker refer to *The Irish Avatar* – once.

2: Moore, *Journals*, ed. Dowden, II 501, quoted Vail, *op. cit.*, 74.

3: BLJ VIII 219, quoted Vail, *op.cit.*, 73.

The Irish Avatar⁴

*And Ireland, like a bastinadoed elephant, kneeling to receive the paltry rider.*⁵

1.

Ere the Daughter of Brunswick⁶ is cold in her grave,
And her ashes still float to their home o'er the tide,
Lo! George the triumphant speeds over the wave,
To the long-cherished Isle which he loved like his bride!

2.

True – the Great of her bright and brief Era are gone,
The Rain-bowl-like Epoch when Freedom could pause
For the few little years out of ages undone
Which betrayed not – or crushed not – or wept not her cause.

3.

True – the Chains of the Catholic⁷ clank o'er his rags,
The Castle⁸ still stands – and the Senate's no more –⁹ 10
And the Famine¹⁰ which dwelt on her freedomless Crag
Is extending its steps to her desolate shore.

4.

To that desolate shore – where the Emigrant stands
For a moment to gaze, ere he flies from his hearth;
A tear falls on his chain, though it drops from his hands,
For the dungeon he quits is the place of his birth.

5.

But he comes! the Messiah of Royalty comes –
Like a goodly Leviathan¹¹ rolled from the waves –
Then receive him as best such an Advent¹² becomes –
With a legion of cooks, and an army of slaves. – 20

6.

He comes in the promise and bloom of threescore¹³
To perform in the pageant the Sovereign's part –
But long live the Shamrock¹⁴ which shadows him o'er
Could the green in his hat be transferred to his heart!

4: "Avatar" is a Hindu word meaning the incarnation of a god. Byron's association of the frightening concept with the ridiculous George IV is intended as bathetic: "this is all the Irish can muster by way of an avatar".

5: From the *Life* of John Philpott Curran (1819), by his son W.H. Curran. The bastinado is a very painful punishment in which the soles of the feet are beaten with canes.

6: Princess Caroline of Brunswick (1768-1821), married George in 1795.

7: "Catholic" has three syllables.

8: Dublin Castle, emblem of English imperialism.

9: Refers to the abolition of the Irish parliament by the Act of Union of 1800.

10: The really horrible Potato Famine did not hit Ireland for another twenty-five years; but starvation was a constant threat in the Irish countryside.

11: A Leviathan is an enormous sea-beast: B. jokes with George's weight problem.

12: An advent is a coming: George is like Christ, come to redeem his Irish subjects.

13: George (1762-1830), was fifty-nine in 1821.

14: The shamrock is the emblem of Irish nationalism. Wearing one in one's hat was later banned by the English: see *The Wearing of the Green*. On a later visit to Edinburgh – stage-managed by Sir Walter Scott – George wore a kilt (with flesh-coloured tights). See *AoB*, final section, or *Don Juan*, X, 86, 5-8.

7.

Could that long withered spot but be verdant again,
 And a new spring of noble affections arise
 Then might Freedom forgive thee this Dance in thy Chain,
 And this shout of thy Slavery which saddens the skies. –

8.

Is it Madness or Meanness which clings to thee now?
 Were he God, as he is but the commonest Clay 30
 With scarce fewer wrinkles than sins on his brow
 Such servile devotion might shame him away.

9.

Aye, roar in the train! let thine Orators lash
 Their fanciful Spirits to pamper his pride
 Not thus did thy Grattan¹⁵ indignantly flash
 His Soul o'er the freedom implored and denied.

10.

Ever glorious Grattan! the best of the good!
 So simple in heart, so sublime in the rest!
 With all which Demosthenes¹⁶ wanted endued,
 And his rival, or victor, in all he possessed. 40

11.

Ere Tully¹⁷ arose in the zenith of Rome,
 Though unequalled, preceded, the task was begun –
 But Grattan sprung up like a god from the tomb
 Of ages, the first, last, the saviour, the *one*!

12.

With the skill of an Orpheus to soften the brute;¹⁸
 With the fire of Prometheus to kindle mankind;¹⁹
 Even Tyranny, listening, sate melted or mute,
 And Corruption shrunk scorched from the glance of his mind.

13.

But back to our theme! Back to despots and slaves!
 Feasts furnished by Famine! rejoicings by Pain! 50
 True freedom but *welcomes*, while slavery still *raves*,
 When a week's saturnalia²⁰ hath loosened her chain.

14.

Let the poor squalid splendour thy wreck can afford,
 (As the bankrupt's profusion his ruin would hide)
 Gild over the palace, Lo! Erin, thy lord!
 Kiss his foot with thy blessing – his blessings denied!

15: Henry Grattan (1746-1820), Irish politician, famed for his eloquent public speaking.

16: Demosthenes (383-322 BC), Greek orator, who warned the Greeks against Phillip of Macedon. Equivalent of Grattan.

17: Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC), Roman orator, equivalent of Demosthenes.

18: Orpheus tamed the beasts of the underworld with his music.

19: Prometheus stole fire from heaven to assist mankind.

20: A saturnalia is an orgy.

15.

Or *if* freedom past hope be extorted at last,
 If the idol of brass find his feet are of clay,
 Must what terror or policy wring forth be classed
 With what monarchs ne'er give, but as wolves yield their prey? 60

16.

Each brute hath its nature; a king's is to *reign* –
 To *reign!* in that word see, ye ages, comprised
 The cause of the curses all annals contain,
 From Cæsar the dreaded to George the despised!

17.

Wear, Fingal!²¹ thy trapping – O'Connell,²² proclaim
 His accomplishments! *His!!!* and thy country convince
 Half an age's contempt was an error of fame,
 And that "Hal is the rascaliest, sweetest *young* prince!"²³

18.

Will thy yard of blue ribbon²⁴ – poor Fingal – recall
 The fetters from millions of Catholic limbs? 70
 Or has it not bound thee the fastest of all
 The slaves who now hail their betrayer with hymns?

19.

Aye, "Build him a dwelling!" let each give his mite!²⁵
 Till, like Babel,²⁶ the new Royal dome has arisen!
 Let thy beggars and helots²⁷ their pittance unite –
 And a palace bestow for a poor-house and prison. –²⁸

20.

Spread – spread for Vitellius²⁹ the royal repast,
 Till the gluttonous monster be stuffed to the gorge –
 And the roar of his drunkards proclaim him at last
 The Fourth of the fools and oppressors called "George." 80

21.

Let the tables be loaded with feasts till they groan –
 Till they groan like thy people, through ages of woe –
 Let the wine flow around the old Bacchanal's throne,
 Like their blood which has flowed, and which yet has to flow.

21: Arthur James Plunkett, eighth Earl of Fingal (1759-1836), Catholic politician.

22: Daniel O'Connell (1775-1847), Irish politician. Both he and Fingal were foremost in their sycophancy towards George.

23: B. quotes Falstaff on Prince Hal (in *Henry IV*) but puts the fat, Falstaffian George in the role of the Prince. Compare *Don Juan X*, 86, 7.

24: A blue ribbon was the emblem of B.'s party, the Whigs.

25: Fingal suggested that there should be a palace erected for George in Ireland, and that even the poorest people should help pay for it.

26: The Tower of Babel (see Genesis) emblem of mankind's linguistic confusion.

27: Helots were the lowest military caste in Spartan society. Many Irishmen were forced by poverty to join the English army.

28: For B., palaces were prisons and vice versa. See *CHP IV*, opening, and *PoC*, closing section.

29: Vitellius (15-69), was a gluttonous Roman Emperor who reigned for less than a year before being murdered.

22.

But let not *his* name be thine idol alone –
 On his right hand behold his Sejanus³⁰ appears!
 Thy own Castlereagh!³¹ let him still be thine own!
 A name, never spoke but with curses and jeers!

23.

Till now, when the Isle which should blush for his birth,³²
 Deep – deep – as the gore which he shed on her soil, 90
 Seems proud of the reptile which crawled from her earth,
 And for Murder repays him with shouts and a smile. –

24.

Without one single ray of her Genius³³ – without
 The fancy – the manhood – the fire of her race³⁴ –
 The Miscreant who well might plunge Erin in doubt,
 If she ever gave birth to a being so base.

25.

If she did – let her long-boasted proverb be hushed,
 Which proclaims that from Erin no reptile can spring³⁵ –
 See the cold-blooded Serpent, with venom full-flushed,³⁶
 Still warming its folds in the breast of a King! 100

26.

Shout – drink – feast – and flatter! Oh, Erin! how low
 Wert thou sunk by Misfortune and Tyranny, till
 Thy welcome of Tyrants hath plunged thee below
 The depth of thy deep in a deeper gulf still.

27.

My voice, though but humble, was raised for thy right,³⁷
 My vote as a freeman's, still voted thee free;
 This hand, though but feeble, would arm in thy fight,
 And this heart, though outworn, had a throb still for thee!

28.

Yes, I loved thee and thine – though thou art not my land;
 I have known noble hearts and great souls in thy sons; 110
 And I wept with the world o'er the patriot band
 Who are gone, but I weep them no longer as once.

30: Sejanus (d.31 AD), was right-hand man to the Emperor Tiberius, and was deposed and murdered at his command.

31: Robert Stewart, Viscount Castlereagh (1769-1822) George's unpopular Foreign Secretary. Committed suicide the following year.

32: Castlereagh was born in Dublin.

33: "genius" has two syllables.

34: Castlereagh was a poor public speaker, in contrast to the other Irish politicians B. mentions.

35: Ireland has no snakes. St Patrick is said to have driven them all out. It is a paradise with no serpent, and can therefore in theory not Fall. Dublin has disproved the theory.

36: For more abuse directed at Castlereagh, see *Don Juan*, Dedication.

37: Refers to B.'s Roman Catholic Claims speech in the Lords on April 21st 1812.

29.

For happy are they now reposing afar,
 Thy Grattan – thy Curran³⁸ – thy Sheridan³⁹ – all
 Who, for years, were the Chiefs in the eloquent war,
 And redeemed, if they have not retarded, thy fall.

30.

Yes! happy are they in their cold English graves!
 Their shades cannot start at thy shout of to-day –
 Nor the steps of Enslavers and chain-kissing slaves
 Be stamped in the turf o'er their fetterless Clay. 120

31.

Till now, I had envied thy sons and thy shore,
 Though their virtues were hunted, their liberties fled –
 There was something so warm and sublime in the core
 Of an Irishman's heart, that I envy – thy dead! –

32.

Or, if aught in my bosom can quench for an hour
 My contempt for a nation so servile though sore,
 Which though trod like the worm will not turn upon power,
 'Tis the glory of Grattan, and genius of Moore!⁴⁰

(Signed) W.L.B. **⁴¹ M.A., and written with a view to a Bishoprick
 [16 Sept. 1821]

[*Manuscript note:*] M.S. Lord Byron on the King's visit to Ireland a very seditious & horrible libel which never was intended to be published & which Lord B called himself "a silly <ill-natured> thing written in a moment of ill nature" – C.B.

38: Charles Philpott Curran (1750-1817), Irish politician.

39: Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816), Irish politician and dramatist. Friend of B.

40: Thomas Moore (1779-1852), Irish poet, B.'s friend, in whose style this poem is written.

41: B. intends "William Lisle Bowles," an Anglican vicar and poet whom he despised for his low evaluation of Pope.