

David Ellis, *Byron in Geneva: That Summer of 1816*. Liverpool University Press, 2011. Pp. 224. £25. ISBN 9781846316432.

Byron in Geneva is the latest contribution to a seemingly unending line of biographical studies of Byron. Ellis is swift to acknowledge in his preface that 'there are already a sufficient number of biographical studies for this new one to require an explanation' (vii) and is astute to the shortcomings of what he terms 'cradle-to-grave lives of Byron' (vii), especially to those recent studies which provide a somewhat too overt focus on Byron's bad behaviour (Grosskurth), rumoured transgressions (Eisler), and sexual proclivities (MacCarthy). He justifies his own study as a more fairly representative portrayal of the poet by focusing on a critical phase of Byron's life, the significance of which Ellis insists is 'as much literary as biographical' (ix). Regrettably, his prefatorial justifications prove more compelling than his execution.

The book provides a chronological account of Byron's time in Geneva during 1816, the renowned Year Without a Summer. Ellis opens with a consideration of the social and literary appeal of Geneva, while sketching the motivations behind Byron's self-exile on the Continent, namely the poet's separation from Lady Byron and his descent from fame to infamy. The following chapters attend to the various social and literary experiences Byron encountered, exploring his close relationships with the Shelleys, Claire Clairmont, and Polidori. In addition to Shelley's impact on Byron's poetry, Ellis also considers Byron's acquaintance with Madame de Staël, August Wilhelm Schlegel, and Matthew 'Monk' Lewis. He closes the main portion of the study with the Genevan group's excursion to the Lauterbrunnen Valley, before concluding with four short 'Afterwords' on the eventual fates of the book's major figures, rather predictably ending with a section on Byron's own 'Last Rites'.

One of the more engaging portions of the book is Ellis's opening account of the symbolic importance of contemporary Geneva as one whose Alpine panoramas spoke more to the Romantic Byron of *Childe Harold*, than the carnivalesque sexual landscape of Venice that proved so influential in Byron's writing post-1818. The Swiss city was allegedly rather more decorous in its sexual mores than La Dominante: according to Stendhal, it was the least likely place to encounter a cuckold.

Perhaps a further advantage of Ellis's study is that no prior knowledge is assumed of Byron's life, works, or the period in general (at one point Ellis comments that the reader is most likely to be familiar with the age in which Byron lived 'from the novels of Jane Austen') (14). The book may well be of interest to amateur scholars: it's short and written in an accessible and conversational manner—he compares Byron's Napoleonic coach to a stretch limo (20), and Mary and Percy's *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* (1817), which contained the first publication of 'Mont Blanc', as the contemporary equivalent to a 'Europe on \$5 a day' travel guide (11)—and to those readers who have little knowledge of the poet's life it offers a light and good-humoured introduction. Unfortunately the book has no new material to offer, rather, it reorchestrates what we already knew about the events of 1816 and is too general and too simplistic to be of interest to an academic audience.

Ellis gives some indication of his primary concerns toward the end of the book: 'The four months [Byron] had spent in Switzerland were very important

for his poetic development, and also for his friendships, but they had not allowed him to forget the pain and humiliation of the separation from his wife, or to decide what he now ought to do with his life' (137). This sentence is representative of the study's prioritization of the more banal elements of Byron's time in Geneva, and reveals the biggest failing of the study: its disappointing neglect of the literary. Though some attention is given to the poetry—mostly in connection with the circumstances of its composition—what readings are provided are not just unsophisticated, but agonizingly literal. Ellis's assessment of the third canto of *Childe Harold* as 'stagy', 'melodramatic', and littered with 'unconvincing' posturing, 'like the postures adopted by a bed-ridden invalid in a vain effort to alleviate the pain' (34) is a crude response to a canto that is revealing of Byron's complex intellectual response to contemporary Romantic ideologies, serving a similar function to Wordsworth's *Prelude* in charting the growth of the poet's mind.

Though the book fails in its ultimate aim to carve a convincing niche for itself amidst the plethora of biographies of the poet, it does succeed in raising the important question of why in recent years Byron has more commonly attracted pedestrian studies of his life, rather than adventurous studies of his poetry?

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