

BYRON AND JOHN MURRAY: A POET AND HIS PUBLISHER. By Mary O'Connell.

Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014. Pp. 220. ISBN 978-1-78138-133-5. £75.

The legacy of Andrew Nicholson's carefully edited volume of John Murray's letters to Byron has, in part, been to underscore the lack of critical attention granted to the significance of Byron's decade-long relationship with the publisher who brought him to fame. Mary O'Connell's new book fills this gap in Byron scholarship with admirable effectiveness. O'Connell's study examines how the relationship between poet and publisher offers far more than mere biographical anecdote. The book at once illuminates the material circumstances of Byron's earliest poems, along with the poet's (often ambivalent) opinion of those compositions and the writing of poetry more generally, whilst giving due care and attention to both Byron's and his poetry's place in the nineteenth-century publishing industry.

The introduction offers a fascinating negotiation of the tension between art and industry that exists in both publishing and poetry. The former is at once an artisanal practice as well as a means of raising capital. The latter is equally caught between craft on the one hand and commerce on the other. Byron's disparaging opinion of inky thumbled poets who sang for their supper (as he wrote to Thomas Moore in 1818, 'I thought that Poetry was an *art*, or an *attribute*, and not a *profession*') is shown by O'Connell to be not simply snooty, but revealing of the rivalry between those who wrote to be famous, and those who wrote to be fed. From here, the book progresses in chronological fashion, beginning with the early years of Murray's publishing house, and ending with a chapter on the eventual disintegration of the relationship with Byron amidst the poet's increasing

resentment of Murray's commercial control of his works. O'Connell devotes a chapter each to the circumstances surrounding the publication of *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* and *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, whilst the fourth and fifth chapters cover Byron's years of fame, carefully examining the relationship between the success of Byron's *Turkish Tales* and the advantageous location of Murray's infamous Drawing Room. (Charles Lamb's dubbing of Albemarle Street, 'John Murray Street', whilst facetious, gives some sense of the importance of the geographic and demographic positioning of the poet's publisher). In the sixth chapter O'Connell argues that the tensions that led to Byron's eventual separation from Murray were already discernible in 1816, and proceeds to suggest that the break attended to in the final chapter 'necessarily represents a momentous change in the practices of composition, publication and reception' of the preceding years.

The chronological organisation of the chapters and a painstaking level of historical detail, along with titbits from the correspondence, often lends the study the feel of a biography. This is felt particularly keenly in O'Connell's detailing of Murray's friendship with Caro Lamb—described by Leslie Marchand as 'one of the strangest in literary history'. Biographical leanings are equally discernible in O'Connell's attention to the publication history of *Childe Harold*, in which she emphasises Murray's role in ensuring an 'aura of immediate popularity'; for example, the withholding of advance copies of *Childe Harold* from reviewers to ensure he had greater control over the poem's debut, and the delayed publicizing of the poem until after Byron's speech on the Frame Breakers' Act, with the first advertisement for the poem not appearing until the following week. Yet this is not to suggest that O'Connell's study is disinterested in the poetical ramifications of Byron's

relationship with Murray. She moves with great subtlety from Murray's crucial role in Byron awaking to find himself famous to a closely focussed reading of Byron's 'equivocal' opinion of fame in the poem itself, which the author contends is motivated by the poet's fear of being forgotten. This discussion, in turn, informs her reading of the Turkish Tales, where Byron's own dismissive attitude to the easy writing of the poems is engagingly delineated with judiciously selected quotations from the letters—*The Bride of Abydos* according to Byron 'cost' him but 'four nights', while *Lara* was supposedly written 'whilst undressing' after Society soirees. O'Connell is careful to balance such flippancy against moments when Byron betrays his anxiety that he was writing too fast for fame—though there is irony, perhaps, that what is now widely considered Byron's best poem, *Don Juan*, is one that purports to have been composed off-the cuff and in the moment with as little *effort* as the casting off of evening dress.

O'Connell's insistence on the centrality of the Byron/Murray relationship for our comprehension of the poet's development is evident from the early pages of the book. These foreground discussion of Byron's stanzas on 'My Murray', a playful burlesque of William Cowper's 'My Mary':

Along thy sprucest bookshelves shine
The works thou deemest most divine –
The 'Art of Cookery,' and mine,
My Murray.

The introduction illuminates Murray's central importance for Byron's career as a poet: his reputation as a publisher who would only buy works that would sell, his careful ensuring that Byron's radicalisms were sufficiently contained so as to appeal to the widest readership possible, and, perhaps most significantly, his impact on the poems themselves. The introduction also offers some substantiation of the general consensus that Byron's relationship with Murray was 'unique'. The author examines this specific poet/publisher relationship within a lengthy tradition of similar relationships, specifically that of Dryden/Tonson, which both Byron and Murray saw (with perhaps a rather self-inflated sense of literary stature) as analogous to their own. O'Connell rightly asks why, when there are countless contemporary examples of authors enjoying extremely close and productive friendships with their publishers? She lists the examples of Samuel Johnson and Robert Dodsley, Mary Wollstonecraft and Joseph Johnson, John Clare and John Taylor, Samuel Coleridge and Joseph Cottle, and James Hogg and William Blackwood. Yet throughout the study O'Connell reveals the Byron-Murray relationship as idiosyncratic. Not only were the two men unusually close (even by comparison with the examples listed above) but because Murray's influence extended well beyond the marketing and production of Byron's poems. Murray holds sway not only over the reception of Byron's work, but, more uniquely, over the poet's development (though it is regrettable that the latter is given less attention in this book than the author evidently feels it deserves).

One of the major strengths of the book is that O'Connell is unafraid to challenge long-held critical assumptions by demanding we look at the evidence. For instance, she suggests that the received notion of a politically incoherent affiliation

between liberal poet and conservative publisher is rather more complex than previously assumed. The persuasive argument is made that, rather than narrow-minded Toryism, any 'containment' by Murray of Byron's radicalism in *Childe Harold* was likely motivated by the publisher's need to maximise the poem's appeal to the more orthodox reader that the first luxury quarto edition was evidently intended for. Yet she is equally swift to correct the typecasting of Murray 'as a man with few principles beyond the commercial'. A further strength is that the study is evidently the result of careful negotiation of the two most valuable resources available to Byron scholarship: the Murray Archive at the National Library of Scotland, and the Byron community itself. The former has gratifyingly led to the exciting decision by author and Press to reproduce five high-resolution images of selected manuscript correspondence between poet and publisher, whilst the latter is poignantly felt through the frequent reference to work by Nicholson and Peter Cochran.

In short, O'Connell's book is an extremely important and much needed addition to Byron studies, and will be of equal interest to the academic community and to a more general Byronic readership.

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