



My Recollections of Lord Byron

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EXCERPT:

“To know another man well, especially if he be a noted and illustrious character, is a great thing not to be despised.”—Sainte-Beuve.

Many years ago a celebrated writer, in speaking of Lord Byron, who had then been dead some years, said that so much had already been written upon him that the subject had almost become commonplace, but was far from being exhausted. This truth, indisputable when applied to Byron’s genius, his works, and to his intellect, was then and still is equally positive when referring to his moral qualities. A subject as well as an object may become commonplace by the quantity, but nevertheless remain new and rare, owing to its quality. A subject can not be exhausted before it has been seen under every one of its various aspects, and appreciated in all its points. If much has been said of Lord Byron, has his truly noble character been fairly brought to light? Has he not, on the contrary, been judged rather as the author than the man, and have not the imaginary creations of his powerful mind been too much identified with reality? In the best biographies of his life do we not meet with many gaps which have to be filled up—nay, worse, gaps filled up with errors which have to be eradicated to make room for the truth? The object of this work is precisely to do away with these errors and to replace them by facts, and to dispel the shadows which fancy has raised around his name. For the old opinions we wish to substitute new appreciations, by weighing exactly the measure of truth which exists in the former; and by the logic of facts we wish to judge fairly so as to prevent posterity from being deceived. In doing this we do not pretend to give England any new information. For a long time, no doubt, error sprang from that country; but years and events have passed since that state of things existed. The liberal and tolerant spirit, enlightened by philosophy, which has spread all over liberal England, has also been reflected in the opinions formed of men, and has modified many pages of biography and history and made Englishmen feel how numerous were the wrongs of which they were guilty toward their illustrious countryman.

It is useless to speak of the national selfishness of England, and pretend that she only appreciates or rewards with her love and esteem such writers as flatter her pride or hide her defects from the eyes of foreigners. This may be true, generally speaking; but Lord Byron’s patriotic feelings were of a very different cast. He thought it best to expose to the world at large the faults of his countrymen, in order to correct them. His patriotism was influenced by the superiority of the noble sentiments which actuated his life. Feeling as he did, that he was, above all, a member of the great human community, and declaring it openly; despising popularity, if it cost him the sacrifice of a truth which he deemed it useful and right to proclaim, and thus going against many of the passions, prejudices, and opinions of his countrymen, Byron certainly wounded many susceptibilities; and could we forget all he had to suffer at the hands of the English, we might almost say he was too severe in his judgments upon them. Notwithstanding, however, it is almost impossible to travel in England without meeting everywhere some token of homage paid to the memory of Byron. Scotland, who looks upon him almost as a son, is proud to show the several houses wherein he lived when a child, and preserves his name and memory with love and respect. To have seen him once, is a recollection of which one is proud. A particular charm encircles the places, mountains, rivers, and bridge of Don, of which he speaks, simply because he has mentioned them in his poems. A letter or any thing which has belonged to him is looked upon as a treasure.

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