Peter Cochran

reads

Byron and the Isles of Imagination: A Romantic Chart

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edited by Alistair Heys and Vitana Kostadinova

BYRON FELT ANTITHETICALLY about islands, as he did about everything. It depended on how long he'd lived on one. Venice was in November 1816 "(next to the East) the greenest island of my imagination": but by December 1819 it had been deprived of its island status (which it didn't deserve in the first place, any more than "the East" did), and was just "the Sea-Sodom".[1] In *The Corsair*, Conrad deserts his island, goes on a futile expedition, and returns to find it made desolate by his desertion—he has been "The careful pilot of [his] proper woe".

In *Don Juan*, Haidee usurps her father's island, only to have him return and render it, too, "desolate and bare": though not until the trimmer-poet, "being in a lone isle among friends", has sung ("or would, or could, or should have sung") the greatest (and most ambivalent) lyric to islands ever composed. Byron's islands are not be confined by mere geographical accuracy. Lambro's island is located on whichever side of the Greek peninsula it pleases Byron to place it. He tells us that it's "One of the wild and smaller Cyclades" but then has Haidee speak with "an Ionian Accent". It's commonplace (and only natural) to refer to *The Island*, in which Torquil, the Hebridean islander, pairs off with Neuha, from Polynesia: less written-about is *The Age of Bronze*, in which Britain ("the busy Northern Isle") is contrasted with "yon lone Isle" of St Helena, on which Britain has imprisoned her greatest enemy.

As Caroline Franklin reminds us in her Preface to this collection of essays, islands are common *topoi* in English literature: John Donne, Prospero, and Crusoe (she might have mentioned Jim Hawkins) are but the tip of the iceberg. Many British writers share the same geographically-dictated preoccupation. Byron is by no means alone.

But can a book be compiled dealing solely with his islands? The best thing here by far is Bernard Beatty's superbly focussed piece, which by the simple method of going through most Byronic islands and testing each from as many perspectives as possible, does the subject more than justice. The swiftness and facility of his erudition are breathtaking. Islands, he points out, are either isolated paradises or lonely prisons, and sometimes both. I didn't know that even while wooing Mrs Spencer Smith on her Calypso's isle, Malta, Byron was being treated for gonorrhoea (92: in fact, I'm still not sure that he was). There is a certain romanticism about some of Beatty's points: surely when the Giaour, and Conrad the Corsair, dress as monks, their gestures are treacherous—they only have "left the world" (94) the better to betray it? Beatty is on stronger ground when he contrasts the "opera set" (95) that is Conrad's

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[1] *Byron's Letters and Journals*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand, 13 vols (London: John Murray, 1973–94), V 129-32, VI 262.

isle with the more three-dimensional one that is Lambro's: for Lambro's is an island in ottava rima, and we expect greater depth in that medium. (Incidentally, the editorial decision to left-justify all eight lines in the ottava rima stanzas quoted by the contributors needs explanation.)

Shona M. Allan's essay also solves the problem by a simple and obvious method: by taking *The Island* as her sole text. She concedes the hybrid nature of the poem ("it often seems as if it on a rollercoaster ride": 168), but fails, as most commentators do, to point out its unsatisfactory narrative structure, which, as Byron is writing for a more downmarket audience, should be more accommodating. The only interesting action—which, since it celebrates "girl power" (167), feminist critics like especially—happens in the last quarter. For male (or boyish) readers, who, brought up on Clarke Gable, Marlon Brando and Mel Gibson (our cinematic Fletcher Christians) want fisticuffs, musketry and alpha-male power struggles, it's a let-down: and its comic characters are embarrassing. Allan concedes that its section on the mutiny "does produce tameness in some degree" (171).

A major problem is the fifty-eight page Introduction, which is very hard to read. Its machinery needs work: on its first page it refers to a writer, "McLynn", who doesn't feature in its bibliography (though he does in a much later bibliography). Later "Harriet Guest" is quoted, but her book is named neither in the bibliography nor the main index.

Straightforward simplicity is not this writer's strong point. He loves adverbs too much:

> In part, my argument considers the two contrasting figures of Childe Harold and Don Juan, who are tentatively viewed as sublimely English if linguistically curious and so much more acculturatedly continental, respectively. (22)

Sentences often collapse beneath their own weight:

> It is hard to picture Shelley as an "evil" English colonialist who patronizingly slights the nevertheless complicated cultures of less technologically advanced peoples but, apparently, noble savages cannot love in quite the same way as a highly civilized being like Shelley since Shelley values the love of civilized beings beyond that of savages. (38)

Other sentences badly need rewriting:

> The surprising eruption of an allusion to Shakespeare's Marlovian anti-hero in the text reminds that to Hobbes life in the state of nature is nasty, brutish and short, which is the opposite of the island discourse best symbolised by Neuha's femininity, who, Ariel-like, would seem to encapsulate the spirit of the island […]. (40)

On the next page, a character called "Ben Gun" is referred to. "Ben Bunting" may be intended, but Stevenson's "Ben Gunn" is being remembered.

The admirable ambition to cast one's critical net as wide as possible, snaring not just Rousseau but Polly Toynbee, not just Edward Heath but Diderot, Alex Salmond and Tim Fulford, needs a more lucid vehicle than this.

Several essays in the volume only nod in the direction of islands from time to time, out of duty. Michael O'Neill has some obvious pegs upon which to hang his essay: Arnold's "Yes! In the sea of life enisled", and Byron's "[…] lone as some Volcanic isle". With these as his starting-points he writes a fine essay on Arnold's reading of Byron ("His poems engage in an inexhaustible dialogue with Byron's work": 68). O'Neill almost convinces me that it's at last time to read *Empedocles on Ætna*; but he surely understates when he writes that Arnold "seems less than fully attuned to or aware of the achievement of the *ottava rima* poems" (85). Arnold had no time for *Don Juan* at all. In this essay, islands stay for the most part at a distance.

Emily Bernhard Jackson has an excellent essay, largely on Byron and Southey, in which the word "island" crops up now and then. Her thesis about Byron ("Here […] is a man thoroughly entangled with his enemy": 110) seems very just.

Alistair Heys's Bakhtinian piece likewise remembers to use it occasionally (and is better-written than his introduction, referred to above). His meditation on the way Carnival disrupts the narratives of both *Beppo* and *Don Juan* IV raises many interesting issues. Among Byron's inspirations for the latter may well have been a work so carnivalesque that he wasn't prepared to draw attention to it—I mean Pietro Buratti's dialect poem (in ottava rima) about the death of the elephant in Venice in 1818. The unhappy beast stampeded and was slaughtered immediately *after* the Carnival, when it refused to budge from its booth. Its wild run (during which there was no bodily fluid which it did not excrete) was thus a protest against the curtailment of Carnival, and an intuitive insistence that Carnival should be a year-round thing. Byron's move from the discrete *Beppo* (1817) to the infinitely extensible *Don Juan* (1818) may show a similar insistence on his part.

In linking Byron's search for an island paradise with Japanese Buddhist paradises, Mamuro Kadota's fascinating essay plays most exotically with the theme, and while Nora Liassis concentrates with expertise on just one island, Cyprus, her examination of the Cyprian figure of Aphrodite has to conclude that Aphrodite doesn't play the central part in Byron's drama that his mythic status as a lover and writer about love would suggest: he "lacks the intense personal involvement of the ancient writers" (244).

Vitana Kostadinova's wide-ranging essay is about orientalism first, islands a long way second. This is not to decry the essays, which make highly informative reading, but to point out the difficulty (from which the introduction clearly suffers) of getting together an ad hoc collection of essays even around so interesting a concept. Nevertheless, this beautifully-produced book is worth acquiring, and delivers paradoxically more than its title promises.