

# **BYRON AND "THE ABBEY"**

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Byron and "The Abbey" by Henry Austen Driver

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**HENRY AUSTEN DRIVER**

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# BYRON

AND

## "THE ABBEY."

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A FEW REMARKS UPON THE POET, ELICITED BY THE REJECTION OF HIS STATUE BY THE DEAN OF WESTMINSTER: WITH SUGGESTIONS FOR THE ERECTION OF A NATIONAL EDIFICE TO CONTAIN THE MONUMENTS OF OUR GREAT MEN.

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BY

HENRY AUSTEN DRIVER,

AUTHOR OF

"HAROLD DE BURUN;"—"THE ARABS;" &c.

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April 2 1838

In giving publicity to the following remarks, the Author has no other end in view than to do justice to BYRON, and promote, to the extent of his abilities, the NATIONAL object suggested. As a mouse may release a lion, so, a trifling *Brochure* like the present, however humble in the scale of literature, may help to set free the Fame of the Poet from the entanglements of prejudice: while the general hints thrown out—though for a somewhat gigantic object—may, under higher auspices, be as easily practicable, as the accomplishment of them would be greatly creditable to the spirit of the country.

*Barnsbury Park, Islington,  
December, 1838.*

## BYRON AND "THE ABBEY."

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By the communion of the imperishable mind the dead still dwell among the living. But the PERSONAL CHARACTER of a distinguished Writer, however unjustly or unwisely confounded with his LITERARY REPUTATION in his own era, will generally become a question of secondary consideration in the estimation of posterity.

During his life he is, undoubtedly, amenable to society for his *public* conduct, so far as it may be influential upon others. But though the jealous eye of observation may glare upon his immediate actions; though his country may claim a moral right to sit in judgment upon him when he dies; and though the minute details of his personal biography may be occasionally referred to as matters of curiosity by succeeding generations; the works of his GENIUS will become the permanent and paramount objects of interest; while he himself will be ordinarily remembered as little more than a NAME encircled with the halo of *their* celebrity.

The personal history of every great man, nevertheless, may be considered as a portion of the annals of his country; and, as such, ought to be correctly *recorded*. When therefore such an one departs the world, it is the duty of those of his contemporaries who have survived him, to disengage their minds as much as possible from

existing prejudices; to see that the judgment pronounced upon him, in their *own* time, be as nearly as may be a just one; and that the tribute paid to his memory be such as will be most creditable to their own discernment, and most expressive of their own candour in the opinion of posterity.

We are led to these observations by the fate of one, who, though renowned through all the enlightened nations of the earth, is yet unjustly slighted and aspersed by many on his native soil.

Twice have the gates of "The Abbey" been closed against the illustrious BYRON.

His friends and admirers, on the arrival of his remains from Missolonghi, asked the Dean of Westminster—

*if his illumined head*

*Might find repose among the honoured dead?*

but they were answered—"No!" His body was therefore taken to make a TEMPLE of the rustic church of Hucknall. They asked again, if a marble tribute to his genius might be permitted to shine amidst the gothic shadows of "The Abbey?" but again they were answered—"No!" and the Statue of the great Poet still lies in the obscurity of the *Custom-house* of this—"Metropolis of the world!"

But few of us were aware of the neglect, or even of the existence of this noble work of art. But, on the announcement of the fact, simultaneously in both Houses of Parliament, the spirit of thousands was quickened—the fire of controversy rekindled—and the great original himself again summoned from the tomb to stand before the moral tribunal of his country. In the ensuing sessions



the Legislature will probably consider the degree of respect which *ought* to be paid to his memory: but, in the meantime, curiosity is on tip-toe, and conjecture busy as to the probable destination of this monument, said to be one of the Chefs-d'Œuvre of Thorwaldsen, the finest Sculptor of the day, executed in honour of the first of our modern Poets. And it is an enquiry of commanding interest: because the decision upon this particular case may probably determine the *general question* as to the fitness of "The Abbey" as a National receptacle for the ashes and monuments of our celebrated men.

Hitherto, however, it *has* been considered as dedicated to this noble purpose. It is therefore important, for the honour of our distinguished Bard, to ascertain, whether it be the opinion of an enlightened *people*, or whether it be merely the voice of a *limited party*, that has thus declared his bones unworthy to repose within the sanctuary of "The Abbey," and his effigy unfit to rank among the laureled of the nation.

*Does any consistent reason exist for such repulsion?*—This is the great question. If none *consistent*—then the act cannot be considered as national:—and if not national, it is time that the Nation should look to it.

Whatever reason may have been assigned for his exclusion, it must have had reference, either to his RELIGION, or his MORALITY; or to his TALENTS and INFLUENCE as a writer.

It will not require, we think, much argument to shew, that upon *neither* of these grounds can any *valid* objection be raised against his entrance into the monumental Society of his literary predecessors.

As a preliminary duty to ourselves, we at once, and once for all, declare, that we are not here as the apologists of error, or the advocates of vice: nor would we be such for all the honours of "The Abbey." We desire to go candidly into the subject. While, then, we deny the coarser accusations which malignant calumny has heaped upon Byron's head, we are ready to admit, though with feelings of deep regret, that his conduct *was*, on several occasions improper; and that his writings are, in many instances objectionable. To sophisticate these facts would be to vitiate all argument in his favour. But, the question before us is not, how far he resembled or surpassed others in purity or frailty—but, *how far, and in what way, the welfare of society is likely to be affected by his character or his writings?*

First, then, with regard to his RELIGION.

His wavering doubts upon points of faith and doctrine—his want of deference to established forms and opinions—and his indiscriminate attacks upon what he deemed their perversions and abuses—must, for his *own* sake, be lamented by every good, every rational man. But, as regards the degree of mischief which, in *this* respect, his works are likely to produce in the minds of *others*, no one of discernment, who has *really read* them, can have failed to perceive that the forebodings of his contemners are wilfully exaggerated; or, if sincere, are those of vague apprehension, rather than of sound judgment.

He who would make proselytes, even to Irreligion, must have some degree of *consistency*—some *fixed*

notion—some *standard*, as a rallying sign, whereby to lead or delude his sect. Byron had *no* such thing!—All that he ventured to do was to *doubt*: he never had the hardihood seriously to *deny*. His opinions upon Religion—if he had any thoughts deserving of the name—are so contradictory, that they necessarily neutralize each other. A mind thus sceptical even of its own scepticism—wanting faith even in its own want of faith—has no lasting power, we repeat, to lead, nor to mislead mankind: for men do not follow as a chief one who wavers in the van of Infidelity.

Byron, in this particular, differs widely from many of the infidel writers of England, France, and Germany, *They*, with a unity of purpose, and a deadly perseverance, have been fatally oracular to their followers: but *he*, by his paradoxical reveries, has wholly disqualified himself as an oracle. That man must be dull almost to idiocy, who would take the straw *he* offers, and *lean* upon it, mistaking it for a staff.

All that we trace in his works objectionable to religion, evinces but the idle bickerings of a mind ill at ease with itself. We perceive the waywardness of a genius, which, however great, however powerful upon other points, was, upon *this*, subject to strange and fitful impulses:—now sporting buoyantly on the sparkling stream of fancy—now sinking sullenly into the moodiness of doubt; but ever expressing the feelings of the moment, rather than the settled convictions of deliberate thought.

Hence the great folly of those who are constantly holding up to notice the worst portions of his works, in order to *shew* us that they ought not to be read. Far better would it be were the better verses of his nobler