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MIKA ROSS-SOUTHALL

Andrew McConnell Stott

THE VAMPYRE FAMILY
Passion, envy and the curse of Byron
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Geoffrey Bond

LORD BYRON'S BEST FRIENDS
From bulldogs to Boatswain and beyond
120pp. Nick Hugh McCann. £25.
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When Claire Clairmont threatened to leave Lord Byron, he would always reply: "you may go away, if you like but you shall not forget me – no woman who has once loved me has ever forgotten me for I took good care to brand her with such infamy, she could not but remember me for the rest of her existence and I will for the same by you". The effect of Byron was not just felt by women; the Romantic age was feverishly obsessed with him. But those who came closest to the poet and his fame discovered that what they had hoped would improve their own lives turned out to destroy them, as Andrew McConnell Stott shows us in his biography, *The Vampyre Family: Passion, envy and the curse of Byron*.

Stott focuses on the life of the poet during his exile in Switzerland and Italy as witnessed by two of his followers – his personal physician, John Polidori, and the infatuated Clairmont, who was also fleeing England with her stepsister Mary Godwin and Mary's lover Percy Bysshe Shelley. It was Clairmont who ensured that the two travelling parties met on Lake Geneva in the wet summer of 1816, where Mary's *Frankenstein* and Dr Polidori's story "The Vampyre" were to be born. Many biographies, journals and letters have documented this legendary moment in literary history, and Stott has nothing new to tell us about it. Exactly what passed between Clairmont and Shelley, for example, remains both unknown and unknowable. But Stott's dynamic dramatization grabs our attention, and we, too, as outsiders, are cannily lured into the poetic celebrity's inner circle.

The book opens with a fanatical crowd gathered on Byron's doorstep as he prepares to leave England, following the breakdown of his marriage to Annabella Milbanke. The poet, his long-term friend John Cam Hobhouse (described by Stott as "pug-featured and barrel-chested") and Polidori force their way through the frenzy, with the barracking mob repeating "the insults of that day's *Morning Post*". They climb into their carriages and "within minutes the bailiffs arrived to empty the house in lieu of a half-year's rent, giving the crowd the chance to ogle Byron's furniture,

"Lord Byron's Lyon" by Nick Hugh McCann, 1992 (detail)

paintings, his birds and a pet squirrel". Of course, this debacle only heightened his celebrity. The public might have turned against him, but then the key to fame was constant change, he had found: "everything by turns and nothing long". Fittingly, he escaped in a replica of Napoleon's carriage, which soon revealed itself to be unsuitable for the rough terrain of Flemish roads; his capacious bed, meanwhile, with the family motto "Trust Byron" carved on the headrest, was sent on ahead. Stott neatly adds that the poet also had a bust of Napoleon from his schooldays at Harrow, when he would write to his mother about his ambition for greatness: "I will cut myself a path in the world or perish in the attempt".

Just as Byron sought fame, so did Polidori. But his employer enjoyed watching the doctor bristle as he gave him the nickname "Polly-dolly" and ridiculed his attempts at a literary career. Byron shook off this irritating groupie once the summer was over. Although Stott acknowledges that Polidori had some success with a play and a few poems, he sees him as a bathetic figure, who was somehow corroded by the time he spent in the shadow of his hero. The tipping point was when the *New Monthly Magazine* printed Polidori's "The Vampyre" as "A Tale by Lord Byron", intending no doubt to take advantage of the selling power of Byron's name. Polidori's was the first fully realized vampire in English literature, and, Stott argues, since it was the hit of the season in the drawing rooms of London, it can also be read as an attack on the cult of fame, "castigating a jaded chattering class whose appetite for novelty makes them vulnerable to exploitation". Soon after, at the age of twenty-five, Polidori killed himself by drinking a solution of prussic acid.

Clairmont fared little better than Polidori. She lived for longer, into her eighties, but there are angry, tear-blotted passages in her diary which attack the predatory, "evil passions" that fame and genius were permitted to indulge. She saw Byron, under the influence of "free Love", become "a human tyger slaking his thirst for inflicting pain, upon defenceless women who loved him". Tossed aside, like Polidori, and repeatedly ignored, Clairmont blamed Byron for the death of Allegra, her child by him – he had refused to let Clairmont look after Allegra, and had sent the five-year-old to a remote Italian convent where she died from typhus.

Not enough of Byron's poetry is offered in this book to justify the magnetic genius felt by his admirers. A rare snippet, from "The Giaour" (1813), is clearly chosen to corroborate Stott's choice of title:

> But first, on earth as Vampire sent,
> Thy corse shall from its tomb be rent;
> Then ghastly haunt thy native place,
> And suck the blood of all thy race,
> There from thy daughter, sister, wife,
> At midnight drain the stream of life;
> Yet loathe the banquet which perforce
> Must feed thy livid living corse;
> Thy victims ere they yet expire
> Shall know the daemon for their sire.

Lord Byron's Best Friends: From bulldogs to Boatswain and beyond also concentrates on peripheral characters in Byron's life. Here we are convinced of his love of animals (he kept a tame bear while at Trinity College, Cambridge, and two monkeys and a fox while in Venice) and dogs in particular, from his beloved Newfoundlands (Boatswain, the "Phoenix of canine quadrupeds", and Lyon) to his bulldogs (Savage, Smut and Moretto). Geoffrey Bond astutely uses *The Dog* (1852), a reference book by the veterinary surgeon William Youatt, to assess the characteristics of Byron's dog breeds. Youatt describes Newfoundlands as large and devoted, which prompts Bond's suggestion that Byron was not ignorant to how being seen with such a dog would have projected a certain public image. (A single mention of Byron's dogs appears in Stott's book, in a note reporting the legend that the poet responded to fan mail asking for a lock of his hair by sending back clippings from Boatswain, although the dog was dead before the days of Byron's real celebrity.)

Bond narrates the story of Byron's life plainly, with help from paintings. Some scenes depicting the poet with his dogs have been specially created by the artist Nick Hugh McCann, who has also helped Bond put the rest of the book together. But Byron's discussions about dogs with his childhood neighbour in Southwell, Elizabeth Pigot, are the most fascinating part of *Lord Byron's Best Friends*. At one point, Byron had a terrier called Fanny, who seems to have been the smallest dog he owned and the only bitch. In one of his many letters to Pigot from Cambridge, Byron wrote, "Talking of women puts me in mind of my terrier Fanny – how is she?" Their interaction led to Pigot's illustrated poem "The Wonderful History of Lord Byron and his Dog" (1807), reproduced here in its entirety in colour. Lines such as "He went into the bath, to boil / off his Fat, / And when he was there / Bo'sen' [Boatswain] worried a Cat" are accompanied by skilful watercolour drawings of, for instance, a large, green shoe from which Byron's head pokes out next to Boatswain himself, who bounces around with a cat in his mouth. Having been a chubby young adult, Byron was self-conscious about his weight, something that Pigot amusingly picks up on. A full-page black-and-white photograph, meanwhile, shows Bond, together with his two Newfoundland dogs, sitting on Boatswain's tomb in Newstead Abbey. Such are the blessings of literary fame.