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Byron: Life and Legend

Fiona MacCarthy

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This biography of Byron (by Byron's own publisher John Murray) attempts to reinterpret Byron's life and poetry for a new generation. Fiona MacCarthy has had access to the full John Murray Byron archive, by far the largest in the world. In addition to this resource of correspondence, literary manuscripts and artefacts (many previously unseen by Byron scholars), she has drawn fully on other major collections and has travelled extensively in the Europe that Byron knew, believing strongly in the resonance of place. She aims to bring a fresh eye to Byron's childhood in Scotland, his embattled relations with his mother and the effect on him of his deformed foot. MacCarthy traces his early travels in the Mediterranean and the East, using fresh material to throw light on his series of relationships with adolescent boys - a hidden subject in earlier biographies. Perceptive on the compelling tragi-comedy of Byron's separation, his incestuous love for his half-sister Augusta and the clamorous attentions of his female fans, Fiona MacCarthy gives a new importance to his close male friendships, in particular with his publisher John Murray. For the first time she tells the story of their famous rift, as Byron's poetry became more recklessly controversial. Here Byron is viewed as a formative figure in European romanticism, the literary equivalent of Napoleon in the sweep of his ambition. He was a charasmatic influence on 19th-century music, painting, dress, manners and the art of self-preservation. Not merely a poet, Byron was a man of action, involved in the Italian "Risorgimento" and in the Greek War of Independence in which he died aged 36. Newly translated letters illuminate this tragic episode. Byron was a celebrity in his lifetime, a "superstar" after the publication of "Childe Harold" in 1812. As the Byron legend grew to unprecendented proportions after his death, the problem for the biographer has been to sift the truth from the sentimental, the self-serving and the spurious. What was Byron really like?

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