

## **13<sup>th</sup> International Student Byron Conference: Proceedings**

**Sam Crain, University of Minnesota**

The 13<sup>th</sup> International Student Byron Conference, with “Byron and Fiction” as its theme, began on Monday 21 May in Messolonghi, Greece. The participants registered at the administrative office of the Messolonghi Byron Society and its International Byron Research Center located in the Byron House, situated nicely on the edge of the water. Participants were warmly welcomed with pastries and coffee by Rodanthi- Rosa Florou, President of the Messolonghi Byron Society, as well as Christina Tsekoura, the center’s librarian and other members of the MBS. Professor Peter Graham (Virginia Tech), Director of International Relations extended additional greetings and, along with Mrs. Rosa Florou, officially opened the conference. Following this initial meeting, participants of the conference paid several visits: first to the cathedral of Agios Spyridon, where Byron also had visited and where his lungs were kept in a silver box until 1881, at which time the box was placed under the foundation of his marble statue in the Garden of Heroes; then to the Centre of Literature & Arts “Diexodos” Historic Museum, for a photo exhibition by Nikos Aliagas entitled “Test of Time”; and then to the Municipal Museum of History and Art Gallery with a welcome ceremony by the Mayor of Messolonghi, Mr. Nikolaos Karapanos. Monday night ended with a seafood banquet at a local fish restaurant.

Tuesday began with a wreath-laying ceremony at Lord Byron’s monument, newly renovated by the Messolonghi Byron society, at the site where Byron breathed his last on 19 April 1824 and where the University of Athens dedicated a memorial column to Byron to commemorate the centennial of his death in 1924. The ceremony was followed with visits to Spyridon Trikoupis House-Museum, the home of a prominent statesman, diplomat, and historiographer of the Greek Revolution of 1821 who delivered Lord Byron’s oration, and to the Garden of Heroes, a large memorial garden with many monuments dedicated to Greek fighters and to international Philhellenes who fought and fell during the siege and the Exodus (sortie). At the center of the Garden of Heroes stand the grave of Markos Botzaris and a statue of Lord Byron, underneath which are buried the poet’s lungs.

Immediately preceding the Academic Programme that began in the afternoon was a remembrance of Professor Byron Raizis, a former Joint International President of the IABS and for many years a pillar of the International Student Byron Conferences, including a heartfelt poem from Professor Naji Oueijan of Notre Dame University, Lebanon. Professor Oueijan also opened the first panel with his paper “The Byron Myth,” examining the idiosyncratic blending of fact and fiction in Byron’s biography and *Turkish Tales*. Professor Peter Graham of Virginia Tech followed with “Half-Real Heroes,” a comparison of Byron’s Dedication to *Don Juan* and American rapper Eminem’s “The Calm before the Storm” as satirical takedowns of powerful political figures.

Panel 2 opened with Emily Paterson-Morgan (Byron Society, London), whose “How deceitful is the sagest part” discussed the psychology of love in *Don Juan* I and its revision in Balzac. Professor John Spalding Gatton (Bellarmine University) next gave “Fiction taught to look like fact,,” ’analysing Byron as the absent presence in Tom Stoppard’s play *Arcadia*. The panel prompted a lively Q&A that was followed by a panoramic lunch at “Anatoli” restaurant in the beautiful mountainside village of Retsina, a meal graciously offered by the London Byron Society.

Wednesday morning found participants returning to the Byron House for a quartet of presentations examining Byron’s effect on subsequent fiction-writers. Ghina Awdi (Notre Dame) opened with “The Existential Byronic Hero in *Cain: A Mystery* and Sartre’s *The Flies*,” comparing Sartre’s ‘bad faith’ with Byron’s existential anguish. Next, Daniel Kennedy (Virginia Tech) explored “The Byronic Hero in Cormac McCarthy’s *Blood Meridian*,” reading The Kid as a particularly dark iteration of Byron’s archetype. Penultimately, Sam Crain (University of Minnesota) presented “Byron’s and Shelley’s Influence on *Wuthering Heights*,” reading the novel as a synthesis of aspects of both Satanic Romantics. The panel was closed by George Neame (University of York) with “Representations of Child Harold in *Moby Dick* and *The Screwtape Letters*,” contrasting the sympathetic parallels in Melville with the critique in C.S. Lewis.

At noon, participants visited the Panagia Eleousa Workshop of Special Vocational Training and Rehabilitation, where they were warmly welcomed by staff and residents alike. Following an afternoon free to explore Messolonghi, participants reconvened for the Official Conference Ceremony at the Theoxenia Hotel with Peter Graham introducing the two keynote speakers. Professor Emerita Alice Levine (Hofstra University) spoke first, addressing the question “What Did Byron Have against Fiction?” She traced Byron’s complicated relationship to fiction, looking first at his enjoyment of Scott and Fielding and contrasting it with his dismissal of the fiction he viewed as feminine and promoting religious cant and false sentiment. As Professor Levine concluded, the relationship between fiction and fact in Byron’s own poetry is itself complex. Then Professor Benjamin Markovits (Royal Holloway College, University of London), author of the *Byron Trilogy*, gave participants the perspective of a fiction-writer. He related how he himself discovered Byron through quotations from *English Bards* in Sitwell’s *Atlantic Verse* anthology and explored the perception of Byron as a poet whom one theoretically outgrows but who endures largely on the strength of his satires, particularly *Beppo* and *Don Juan*. After the keynote addresses, participants adjourned to the Theoxenia’s dining room for a gala dinner with live music, followed by traditional dancing in which some participants took part.

Thursday morning participants visited the island chapel dedicated to the Virgin of the Palms, where Byron used to ride at sunset from Messolonghi and where he fell ill under the heavy rain on 10 April 1824, then the mountainside archaeological site of ancient Plevron, named after the mythical hero Plevron. (the site actually consists of two Homeric hillside towns with a beautiful view over the Ionian Sea), and finally the public Roman Baths (Thermae) of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., an impressive T-shaped bath complex.

Afterward, participants stopped in the gulfside village of Krioneri, lying under the imposing rock face of Mount Varassova, for a magnificent seafood lunch at “Capitan Del Mare” and returned to Messolonghi in the evening for the final panel. Yara Baz (Notre Dame) presented “Lord Byron: Fictionalizing Nature,” examining Byron’s instrumentalist view of nature and his pantheism. Professor Roderick Beaton (King’s College-London) spoke on “Byron and *Frankenstein* 200 Years on,” concluding that *Frankenstein’s* Creature may be read as a personification of the

possibility of the resurrection of Greece. Professor Stephen Minta (York) gave the final paper, “Visions of Greece: Byron and *Anastasis*,” in which he explored the aspects of Thomas Hope’s novel that would have appealed to Byron and that demonstrated awareness of the corruptive power of colonialism.

The final day of the conference, on Friday May 25, participants traveled up the west coast to the mountain village of Zitsa for a tour of the Monastery of Prophet Elias where Lord Byron stayed on October 1809 and which inspired *Childe Harold*’s famous stanza on “monastic Zitsa.” The Women Society of Zitsa offered a feast of local delicacies (pies) and the famous Zitsa wine in the Archodariki of the Monastery. After Zitsa, participants visited the city of Ioannina, the capital of Epirus, north-western Greece. Ioannina lies on the western shore of Lake Pamvotis, which occupies the centre of a 480- metre-high basin in a picturesque mountain setting, with the Kyra Frosyni Island in its middle. The highlight of Ioannina was the visit to the tomb and home of Ali Pasha, reachable by a short ferry ride to the island Kyra Frosyni. The one-day excursion was offered thanks to the generosity of the London Byron Society.

Participants said their farewells the next morning after enjoying a conference both intellectually gratifying and socially stimulating.