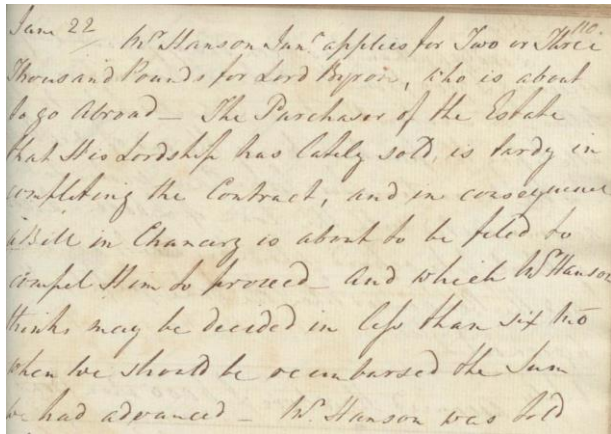


Manuscript of the Month March 2012

Memo re Lord Byron's application for a loan, 22 June 1813



June 22 Mr Hanson Junr applies for Two or Three Thousand Pounds for Lord Byron, who is about to go Abroad - The Purchaser of the Estate that His Lordship has lately sold, is busy in completing the Contract, and in consequence a Bill in Chancery is about to be filed to compel Him to proceed - and which Mr Hanson thinks may be decided in less than six months when we should be reimbursed the sum he had advanced - Mr Hanson was told

Byron's first great narrative poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, was published two hundred years ago in March 1812. So immediate was its success that Byron later recalled, *I awoke one morning and found myself famous*. A few months after Childe Harold's debut, the poet opened an account at Hoare's Bank. This account lasted just four years, but covered a momentous period in Byron's short life.

George Gordon Byron was born in 1788, the son of a spendthrift army captain, known as 'Mad Jack' Byron, and a Scottish heiress, Catherine Gordon. At

the age of ten, he succeeded his great-uncle as 6th Baron Byron of Rochdale. The title, though, brought with it few material benefits, since the accompanying estates were mired in debt and there was little ready cash. Byron's first collection of poems, *Hours of Idleness* (1807), published when he was just nineteen years old, was not well received, although his next work, *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), fared rather better. Shortly after the latter's appearance, Byron set off on a two-year tour of southern Europe, visiting Portugal, Spain, Malta, Albania and Greece. During his travels, he began writing the long narrative poem that was to become *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (Cantos I & II). Regarded by many as semi-autobiographical, a notion Byron was later keen to dispel, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* vividly described the adventures of a young would-be pilgrim knight who, fed up with the pleasures and excesses of his early life, sought fulfilment through reflection and foreign travel. And in Childe Harold himself, Byron created a new kind of fictional hero – moody, mysterious, charismatic, imperfect – that persists down to the present day.

The first edition of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* sold out in just three days and Byron's publisher, John Murray, a near neighbour of Hoare's Bank at 32 Fleet Street, was quick to cash in on his new star, bringing out four further editions that year and another five by 1815. But despite its success, and that of subsequent works including *The Giaour* (1813), *The Bride of Abydos* (1813) and *The Corsair* (1814), which between them sold tens of thousands of copies, Byron's finances remained chaotic, a situation exacerbated by his cavalier attitude towards money. The copyright to *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* was given away to a friend and large sums he could ill afford to spare used to assist friends, family, fellow writers and various political causes. By 1815, Byron calculated that he owed £30,000 (over £1M today), and the bank's ledgers hint at the endless juggling he had to do as he tried to placate the demands of friends, servants, tradesmen and moneylenders. One of the more significant entries, £4,804-12-4 (c.£175K today) paid to Scrope Davies in March 1814, marked the final settlement of a loan used to fund Byron's travels back in 1809-11.

Unsurprisingly, Byron's lawyer was soon exploring the possibility of a bank loan. The partners' memoranda book (pictured) noted in June 1813 that: *Mr Hanson Junr applies for Two or Three Thousand Pounds for Lord Byron...The Purchaser of the Estate that His Lordship has lately sold, is*

Tardy in completing the Contract, and in consequence a Bill in Chancery is about to be filed to compel Him to proceed. And which Mr Hanson thinks may be decided in less than six mo[nths] when we should be reimbursed the Sum. The Hoares, though, remained unconvinced and Mr Hanson was told that we could not consistently with our Regulations advance the money.

Byron's biggest asset was undoubtedly Newstead Abbey, the Nottinghamshire estate he had inherited with his title back in 1798. At first Byron was determined to keep Newstead, but it yielded little income and the huge mansion was crumbling into ruin. Eventually Byron had to bow to the inevitable and Newstead was put up for auction in 1812. This failed to attract a buyer, but soon afterwards Byron received an offer of £140,000 (£4.75M today) from solicitor and MP Thomas Claughton, enough to clear his debts and furnish him with a handsome income besides. Claughton agreed to pay £20,000 by the end of 1812 and a further £60,000 by 1815, at which time the remaining balance would be converted into an interest-paying mortgage. The very first entry in Byron's account at Hoare's was a deposit of £5,000 by Claughton on 31 October 1812. But, as Hanson complained, Claughton was tardy in honouring the contract. The remaining £15,000 of the initial £20,000 only reached Byron's bank account in July 1813, shortly after Hanson's unsuccessful loan application, and little of the promised £60,000 was ever forthcoming. Finally, after protracted wrangling, the sale fell through. Claughton forfeited his deposit and Newstead remained unsold until 1818.

The difficulties brought on by the failure to sell Newstead were compounded by Byron's marriage to Annabella Milbanke, daughter of Sir Ralph Milbanke Bt, in January 1815. Initially, Byron offered to put £60,000 into the marriage settlement, while Sir Ralph was to provide £20,000. But with Newstead unsold and Sir Ralph suffering his own financial reverses, the settlement was never completed. As a result, Byron's financial woes went from bad to worse, so much so that the bailiffs were known to have knocked at his door on more than one occasion. Eventually, in December 1815, nearly a year after the wedding, Sir Ralph paid £5,200 into Byron's account. By that time, however, the marriage, never happy, had collapsed. Annabella returned to her parents with her newborn daughter and Byron saw neither of them again.

In April 1816, with rumours about his private life undiminished and his creditors pressing ever harder, Byron quit London for the Continent. The final three debits from his Hoare's account (£377-5-11 between October and December 1816) were made out to the Swiss banking firm of Hentsch & Co. After summering at Lake Geneva with fellow poet Shelley, Byron moved on to Italy. There he wrote two further instalments of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, based on his travels in Switzerland and Italy and for which he was paid a reputed 2,000 guineas, as well as *Manfred* (1817), *Beppo* (1818) and much of the epic *Don Juan* (1819-24). Then in 1823 Byron sailed to Greece, intent on joining that country's struggle for independence. Months later, aged just 36, he died of fever at Missolonghi. Thus, as the *Morning Chronicle* put it, *has perished in the flower of his age, in the noblest of causes, one of the greatest poets England ever produced.*

Although less widely read today, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* remained hugely popular after Byron's death. JMW Turner's painting, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage - Italy*, was exhibited in 1832, and Hector Berlioz's symphonic *Harold En Italie* received its premiere two years later. The influential art critic John Ruskin, meanwhile, confessed to following in Childe Harold's footsteps during a tour of Switzerland. Nor was he alone. Henry Hoare (Staplehurst) noted in his diary that he and his wife read *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* aloud to each other during their Tyrolean honeymoon in 1836.