

THE LIFE AND THE LEGEND

BYRON. By C. E. Villiamy. Michael Joseph.

BYRON is a subject "made" for the biographer. But have the biographers been made for Byron? From Trelawny to Nicholson and Quennell, they have wavered, making up their minds somewhat arbitrarily about the central "facts" (still only opinions), distracting the reader with much that is picturesque, highly-coloured, and extraordinary. Some have simpered; others have snarled. Each according to his lights has exploited the marvellously eccentric English "milord," who existed apparently to terrify spinsters at home and to convince Latins abroad that hypocritical England can, every now and then, produce, and unanimously reject, a wholly natural man. Byron is a "gift" to the biographer, but a Greek gift.

Among the biographers of Byron C. E. Villiamy must be accorded a distinguished place, because of his fairness, his balance, and his common sense. For him Byron is neither fool nor knave, nor something nasty in the woodpile. He draws out the essential improbability of

the incest story. Where all is so nebulous, so contradictory, Byron cannot ever be completely exculpated; still less can he be convicted.

Byron, a great hater of cant, was eccentric to the point of madness. He did not seek women, but many women sought him. He usually got on well with their husbands, particularly in Italy, where the custom of the country favoured gentlemanly agreements in these matters. Macaulay's definition of Byronism as "a system in which the two great commandments are, to hate your neighbour and love your neighbour's wife" is only half true.

Mr. Villiamy himself offers a sounder definition of Byronism as "the assertion of the individual in his own right, ignoring completely any social or religious context." Again he writes of the Byronic philosophy as made up of four elements, "revolt, individualism, romantic expressionism, and a constant emphasis on emotional values." Byron succeeded to his title unexpectedly after an unhappy childhood, ran through a lot of money, made an inappropriate marriage, loved his children born in or out of wedlock,

abandoned England for Italy and Italy for Greece, helped the Greek revolt with money and his own presence, died nobly, wrote some masterfully colloquial poetry. Mr. Villiamy succeeds in giving us a full picture of a human being, neither an angel nor a monster, and places Byron firmly in his social and historical context.

Mr. Villiamy's own style is pungent and vigorous, and his side-judgments have sometimes an almost Johnsonian absoluteness: "The minds of women do not operate in accordance with an intelligible system, and it would be foolish to apply to their dealings the usual standards of logic and honour. But at least they have motives."

—David Hall

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LORD BYRON

"A gift to the biographer, but a Greek gift"

papers deserved a wider circulation, which the Association provides by assembling them here. The book may be likened to a day's walk through widely differing landscapes. Let us imagine that on this walk there are pleasant water-meadows where one can rest under trees. There are parish

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