

BYRON IN MESSOLONGHI 1824–2024



200 years after the death of Lord Byron, his biographer **ANDREW STAUFFER** revisits Messolonghi, where the poet spent his final days, and reflects on his timeless legacy

The Byron Research Center – and statue – in Messolonghi © Andrew Stauffer

When Lord Byron arrived in Messolonghi in January 1824, he didn't know what he was getting into. He didn't know that he was landing in the midst of a power struggle among Greek leaders – Kolokotronis, Androutsos, Mavrokordatos and the rest – that would occupy him much more than any military conflict with the Ottomans. He didn't know that he would have only 100 days to accomplish whatever he intended in Greece before dying of a fever and his doctors' bloodletting. And he didn't know, but might have dimly foreseen, that his death at the age of 36 would draw the eyes of Europe to this small town in Western Greece.

Byron had spent his Messolonghi days dispensing humanitarian relief, organizing and paying troops, planning with his local brigade of philhellenes, and communicating with British allies. Mostly, he had been trying to figure out what in the world was going on. And then, on 19 April, just as the London war loan to Greece was coming through, it was over.

People who know Byron only by his bad-boy reputation are often surprised by this Messolonghi final chapter. What was a Romantic poet with a reputation as an erotic arch-rebel doing in a warzone? How do we account for his trajectory from bisexual adventures in the Levant, to high-life libertinage in London and Venice, to long-term adulterous monogamy with Countess Teresa Guiccioli, to the stoic embrace of the privations of wartime Greece? What called and kept him there?

The first thing to say is that Byron was always a great traveller, a cosmopolitan at heart, possessed of considerable physical courage and willingness to accept the discomfort and dangers of life on the road. His early travels in Greece and Albania set the tone for his career and the decision to return was in large part predicated on those experiences: riding horseback through the mountain passes, meeting Ali Pasha in his fortress at Tepelene, swimming the Hellespont, sheltering all night from a thunderstorm in a Turkish

graveyard, learning Greek among the handsome young men in the Capuchin monastery in Athens. As he said to a friend, 'If I am a poet, the air of Greece has made me one.' It was almost inevitable that he would return.

Second, Byron had always sought to work for the cause of liberty, from his early speeches in the House of Lords in defence of underdog causes, to his acid political satires, to his leadership in the nationalist Italian Carbonari movement in Ravenna. When his college friends John Cam Hobhouse and Douglas Kinnaird helped found the London Greek Committee and asked Byron for support, he embraced the opportunity. Byron immediately committed money and offered 'to go up to the Levant... perhaps as a reporter on the actual state of things there.' Soon he found himself aboard a boat full of cash and

supplies, headed for Cephalonia and, a bit later, Messolonghi.

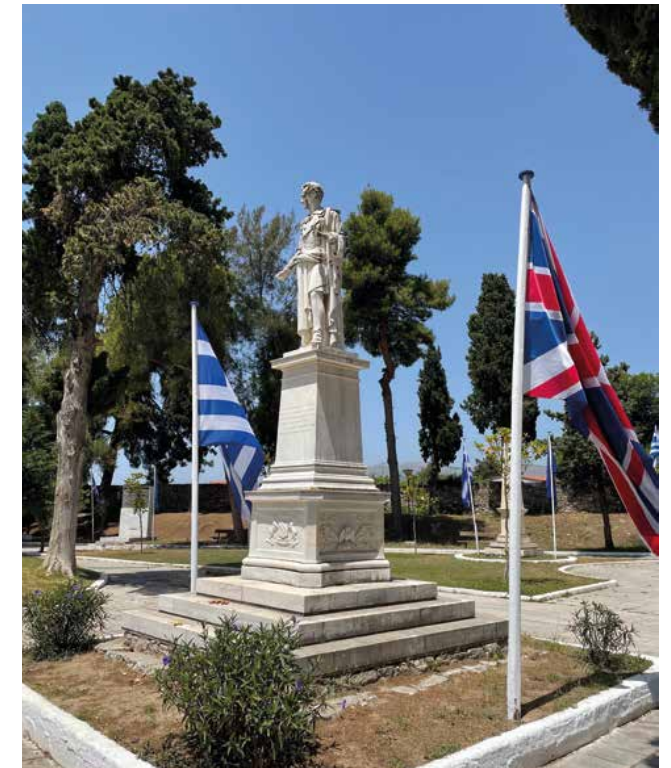
Some have called his last voyage to Greece a half-hearted suicide mission, undertaken by a man at the end of his lifelong battle with depression. I think that goes too far, but there is a sense of finality in the commitment. Byron's late poem, known as "On this day I complete my thirty-sixth year," reflects some of this attitude:

If thou regret thy youth,— why live?—
The land of honourable death
Is here—up to the field, and give
Away thy breath!

Seek out—less often sought than
found—

A soldier's grave, for thee the best.
Then look around, and choose thy
ground,

And take thy rest.



Lord Byron standing proud in the Garden of Heroes © Andrew Stauffer



and they reflect Byron's choice of correspondents, the subjects he discussed with them and the tone he adopted in doing so. Fully half of these letters are to bankers or the London Greek Committee. On the other hand, there are only four short notes – postscripts, really – sent to his long-term mistress Teresa Guiccioli, and they tell an eloquent story of their own, being a record of a radically attenuated attention to the woman who had been so important to him for the past five years: call it the Last Detachment. The Messolonghi letters are largely the equivalent of work emails – with all of the formality, pragmatism, pale humour and request/response rhythms that those entail.

Byron's last days in Greece were primarily a desk job, his time spent in meetings and correspondence, with occasional interventions to settle disputes among the fractious troops and officers from Albania, Greece and Europe who had gathered in Messolonghi to resist the Ottomans, to siphon off Byron's money, or to do both. That desk was situated on the upper floor of the Kapsalis house, in a room whose walls were hung with rifles, swords, dirks, helmets and other instruments of war.

Here Byron did his work for Greece and here, in the adjoining room, he took his last breath. As a contemporary observer wrote, 'Lord B. died in the room at the end [of the house], facing the sea.' It's moving to think of Byron's last look at the world being a view of the sea, what he called in the last stanzas of Childe Harold 'Thou glorious mirror, where the Almighty's form/ Glasses itself in tempests... boundless, endless, and sublime --/ The image of eternity.' The pilgrim was finally coming home.

In April 1826, in an act of final resistance, the Kapsalis house was blown up by its owner, taking the sick and wounded and as many Ottomans as possible with it. In tribute, the Hellenic Ministry of Tourism built a near-replica in 1999, and until 2020 it was occupied by offices of the Municipality. Now the

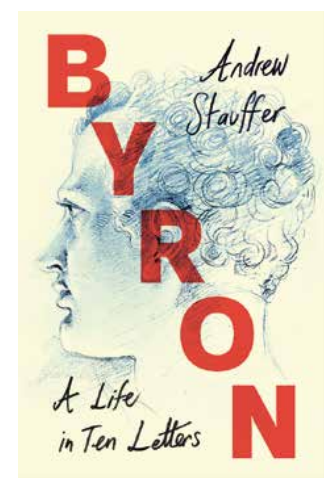
Byron House has been miraculously restored by Mrs Rodanthi-Rosa Florou and the Messolonghi Byron Society, in the shape of the Byron Research Center and Museum, a near-replica of the Kapsalis house in a new location overlooking the same lagoon. And on hot afternoons, when the breeze comes in from across the water, a visitor can look out from the upper windows and see something like Byron's last view of the world.

I visited Messolonghi in July this year as part of an international conference devoted to the life and works of this singular young man whom Percy Shelley called 'the pilgrim of eternity'. Scores of Byron scholars and fans turned up for several days of scholarly papers, musical events, tours, commemorations, dinners and Greek dancing. This lively conference on the bicentennial of Byron's death attested to his ongoing relevance, to Greece and around the world. There were papers on Byron's influence in Poland, Italy, Lebanon, Germany, Georgia and America. More so than most writers of his era, Byron remains a global force.

Off the normal tourist trail in Greece, Messolonghi sits amidst lagoons and mountains, a place of mostly quiet commemoration. Older men sit at the cafes drinking coffee and ouzo. The time-capsule Liberty Hotel broods over the square and the grand old ruined hospital. The occasional scooter buzzes past. Cats prowls. This is the only Sacred City (Hiera Polis) in modern Greece, so designated for its resistance and sacrifice during the Ottoman siege and Exodus, in which the desperate citizens rushed through the city gates, meeting mostly death or enslavement. Those too weak to leave had similar fates soon thereafter. The Kapsalis House, where Byron lived and died, was packed with gunpowder and blown up as the Turks advanced. Messolonghi still vibrates with some of that tragic energy.

Byron's spirit hovers over the town also. His death in Messolonghi put a seal on his commitments to Greece. Ever since, he has been grouped with

the heroes of the revolution and the founders of the modern nation. His statue stands at the focal point of the Garden of Heroes in Messolonghi, between the tomb of Markos Botzaris and the memorial mass grave of those who died during the Exodus. He couldn't be in a more honoured spot, at the end of the long, tree-lined avenue that leads from the entrance gate, high on a plinth overlooking the tombs and monuments of the citizens and philhellenes. His lungs, organs of a poet's breath, were removed before the body went back to England and are buried in a silver chest beneath the statue. In many ways, he's still here.



Near the end of the conference, we all gathered as Byron's great-great-grandson, the Earl of Lytton, placed a wreath on the memorial plinth marking the spot where Byron died, at the original location of the Kapsalis house. The sun blazed down on us in that open square. A few residents eyed us curiously. We were tired from days of talking, listening, drinking, and the moment almost teetered into anti-climax. But then, miraculously, someone pulled out a trumpet and began playing taps. The notes echoed across the little plaza and through the streets, as the Greek and British flags flapped above the plinth. It was a soldier's farewell.

And then there was a poet's farewell too. That evening, the American folk singer Eric Andersen played songs from his album Mingle with the Universe, featuring Byron's poetry set to music. We were all sitting in the courtyard of the Archaeological Museum, in the pink light of sunset, blissed out. Andersen, now 82 years old, still glows with the energy of the Greenwich Village scene of the 1960s where he first made his mark. He began his song "Albion" – 'Messolonghi, I sailed to your shores / I sold and traded everything to see your land set free' – and a church bell rang out, once. It was as if Byron was listening, and answered. Andersen ended his set with his 1966 hit "Violets of Dawn," and it seemed to capture that moment of light and sound, of endings and beginnings, of intimacy and delirium, of Byron's death and his global resonance over the last two centuries, in the holy city of Messolonghi:

Take me to the night I'm tipping
Topsy turvy turning upside down.
Hold me close and whisper what
you will
For there is no-one else around.
Oh, you can sing-song me sweet
smiles
Regardless of the city's careless
frown.
Come watch the no colours fade,
blazing
Into petaled sprays of violets
of dawn. [A](#)

ABOVE TOP The last view Byron enjoyed before his untimely death 200 years ago © Andrew Stauffer
ABOVE BOTTOM Lord Lytton lays a wreath for his ancestor Lord Byron © Rodanthi-Rosa Florou

ABOVE TOP The author's new life of Byron in ten fascinating letters © CUP
ABOVE BOTTOM A poet's farewell: Eric Andersen performs at the recent conference © Rodanthi-Rosa Florou