

BB10 Gone with the wind

Text of **Byron Bits No.10** by Peter Gallagher available on MadBadDangerous.com

I title this talk Gone with the Wind.

Byron was not just the greatest exile of english poetry – maybe of any poetry – but also a poet uniquely out of and ahead of his time.

Out of his time because he is somehow the last great author of what T H White in his wonderful but long-forgotten little book calls “The Age of Scandal”.

In his outlook, erudition, robustness, even in his arriviste nobility, Byron belongs to the great decades of Britain’s global ascension, toward the end of the 18th century. His verse is for the ages but it was almost out of his own time, at the tawdry end of the regency of “Fum the Fourth”, the early rise of the rising middle classes and the ironic plunge into literary correctness, fragile introspection and the fumes of romantic mysticism. “Ironic” because, while poetry – to Byron’s scorn – turned its back, the country turned to its second and greatest social and political revolution.

Only when that struggle had been won, decades later; only when English poetry – saving perhaps for Hardy and one or two others – had got itself thoroughly tangled in heavy baize curtains and gothic romance and had begun to look terminally silly, did Byron’s more worldly brand recover it’s lustre, at least among the barbarians.

You’ll be happy to hear that Lord Byron has the floor for the rest of this talk, beginning at verse 76 of Canto Eleven.

LXXVI

"Where is the world?" cries Young, at eighty" – "Where

The world in which a man was born?" Alas!

Where is the world of eight years past? 'T was there –

I look for it – 't is gone, a globe of glass!

Crack'd, shiver'd, vanish'd, scarcely gazed on, ere

A silent change dissolves the glittering mass.

Statesmen, chiefs, orators, queens, patriots, kings,

And dandies, all are gone on the wind's wings.

LXXVII

Where is Napoleon the Grand? God knows.
Where little Castlereagh? The devil can tell:
Where Grattan, Curran, Sheridan, all those
Who bound the bar or senate in their spell?
Where is the unhappy Queen, with all her woes?
And where the Daughter, whom the Isles loved well?
Where are those martyr'd saints the Five per Cents?
And where – oh, where the devil are the rents?

LXXVIII

Where's Brummel? Dish'd. Where's Long Pole Wellesley? Diddled.
Where's Whitbread? Romilly? Where's George the Third?
Where is his will? (That's not so soon unriddled.)
And where is "Fum" the Fourth, our "royal bird?"
Gone down, it seems, to Scotland to be fiddled
Unto by Sawney's violin, we have heard:
"Caw me, caw thee" – for six months hath been hatching
This scene of royal itch and loyal scratching.

LXXIX

Where is Lord This? And where my Lady That?
The Honourable Mistresses and Misses?
Some laid aside like an old Opera hat,
Married, unmarried, and remarried (this is
An evolution oft performed of late).
Where are the Dublin shouts – and London hisses?
Where are the Grenvilles? Turn'd as usual. Where
My friends the Whigs? Exactly where they were.

LXXX

Where are the Lady Carolines and Franceses?
Divorced or doing thereanent. Ye annals
So brilliant, where the list of routs and dances is, –
Thou Morning Post, sole record of the panels
Broken in carriages, and all the phantasies
Of fashion, – say what streams now fill those channels?
Some die, some fly, some languish on the Continent,

Because the times have hardly left them one tenant.

LXXXI

Some who once set their caps at cautious dukes,
Have taken up at length with younger brothers:
Some heiresses have bit at sharpers' hooks:
Some maids have been made wives, some merely mothers;
Others have lost their fresh and fairy looks:
In short, the list of alterations bothers.
There's little strange in this, but something strange is
The unusual quickness of these common changes.

LXXXII

Talk not of seventy years as age; in seven
I have seen more changes, down from monarchs to
The humblest individual under heaven,
Than might suffice a moderate century through.
I knew that nought was lasting, but now even
Change grows too changeable, without being new:
Nought's permanent among the human race,
Except the Whigs not getting into place.

LXXXIII

I have seen Napoleon, who seem'd quite a Jupiter,
Shrink to a Saturn. I have seen a Duke
(No matter which) turn politician stupider,
If that can well be, than his wooden look.
But it is time that I should hoist my "blue Peter,"
And sail for a new theme: – I have seen – and shook
To see it – the king hiss'd, and then caress'd;
But don't pretend to settle which was best.

LXXXIV

I have seen the Landholders without a rap –
I have seen Joanna Southcote – I have seen –
The House of Commons turn'd to a tax-trap –
I have seen that sad affair of the late Queen –
I have seen crowns worn instead of a fool's cap –
I have seen a Congress doing all that's mean –

I have seen some nations like o'erloaded asses
Kick off their burthens, meaning the high classes.

LXXXV

I have seen small poets, and great prozers, and
Interminable – not eternal – speakers –
I have seen the funds at war with house and land –
I have seen the country gentlemen turn squeakers –
I have seen the people ridden o'er like sand
By slaves on horseback – I have seen malt liquors
Exchanged for "thin potations" by John Bull –
I have seen john half detect himself a fool. –

LXXXVI

But "carpe diem," Juan, "carpe, carpe!"
To-morrow sees another race as gay
And transient, and devour'd by the same harpy.
"Life's a poor player," – then "play out the play,
Ye villains!" above all keep a sharp eye
Much less on what you do than what you say:
Be hypocritical, be cautious, be
Not what you seem, but always what you see.

#Byron/Bits