

Hobhouse and his Father, October 16th 1810-August 9th 1811

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Hobhouse's motive for many weeks after arriving in England from the Mediterranean is to avoid his father, Benjamin Hobhouse, who is angry with him for having run away without telling anyone, and for running up so many debts – the exact cause of their antagonism is hard to determine, but it boils down to evasiveness and cash; Hobhouse seems to expect his father to pay his debts to Byron and to Scrope Davies. The two finally meet on **February 4th 1811**, and are reconciled within five minutes – though John Cam has to atone by keeping strict accounts from now on (which he does, with daily obsession, throughout this part of the diary), and by joining the militia.

On arriving, Hobhouse should go from Falmouth to London. Instead, he goes, via Bodmin, Exeter, Glastonbury, to Bath, where he is befriended by Mr Parry, his stepmother's brother, and is terrified at a rumour that his father is in town. Thence he travels to Bristol, his birthplace, and ends up in a dead end at the village of St Arvans, near Chepstow, on the south Wales coast. Even here he manages to seek out a *χαιματυπη*.

On **October 29th**, while at Bath, he contracts a "quinsey" (tonsillitis). He takes emetics, but these do not work, and so, on **November 1st**, he resorts to a brutal remedy:

Did not sleep a wink all night. Very ill at night. Kitson said it would not break, and just after he went I put my fingers down my throat, and first one side burst then the other, and I continued spitting till eleven o'clock – when in bed a little insane – took laudanum and slept ...

On **November 5th** occurs one of the diary's most touching entries: "Throat well, leg worse – Kitson came – paid a lodging bill (£3 1s 5d) went out – called on Mrs Parry who kissed me." Few people, we suddenly realise, have ever kissed Hobhouse out of simple compassion and affection.

He is constantly polishing his version of the *Ars Poetica*, and on **November 21st** commences *The Wonders of a Week at Bath*, the sex-free imitation of Christopher Antsey's *New Bath Guide*, the febleness of which will soon shame him. Writing to Byron on July 30th 1811 (BB 69) he will describe it as a "contemptible squib".

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On **November 15th** he records, “Received a thundering letter from Pater. Answered it, but sent the answer to Parry – dined at home and took a sweat”. To Byron he writes, on December 10th 1810: “... I have been engaged with a most unpleasant correspondence with my honored progenitor, so you may conceive me to have had no very great leisure or pleasure since I return’d” (BB 58). On **November 22nd** he records, “Received a threatening letter from one Merefield and find my father has not paid poor [Scrope] Davies one farthing – answered the attorney who threatens instant arrest and dined with Mrs Strattan ...”

On **November 25th** he sets off for Bristol. He calls on his old schoolmaster, Dr Estlin, sees other elderly acquaintances, and returns to Bath on **November 28th**, feeling guilty at having spent a single pound. On **November 29th** his father sends him an ultimatum: (the recurring erasure is hard to decipher. It could be “Isle of Man”).

Dined at Mrs Hickes’s – dull day, called in the evening, going to Crawford’s, on Parry, where I received a long letter from him with five articles for me to sign from Mr Hobhouse, and an order to go to the <I of XXXX> – notwithstanding this, supped and talked gaily at Dr Crawford’s – came home and scarcely slept all night.

Articles

1 I declare that all the debts which I have at this time contracted do not amount to more than between 4 & £5,000.

2 I agree to enter into a legal engagement to pay after the death of my father, by annual instalments of not less than £300, the whole amount of the debts, which my father shall discharge for me.

3 I agree to go as Captain in Colonel Lemon’s regiment of militia, and that my father shall give immediate assurance to that effect to the Colonel.

4 I give my word of honour that I will not exceed the income which my father in that situation shall allow me, or be guilty in any instance of any sort of gambling, or *lend* or borrow money, or grant an annuity or be collateral security for another.

5 I agree to go immediately to the <Isle of XXXXX> and to reside there till it shall be my father’s pleasure to recall me *from thence*.

All which propositions, hard as they are, I shall certainly accept, except the <XXXXX> scheme, which is as bad as the King’s Bench.

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With regard to item (1), Michael Joyce in *My Friend H* (p.26) says that Hobhouse's debts to Byron alone totalled £1,325 10s 0d: BLJ II 47n gives the original amount (without interest) as £818 3s 4d, and with interest as £1,323. Sir Benjamin Hobhouse (as by then he had become) paid Byron on March 17th 1812. On November 30th Hobhouse receives a letter from Byron. On December 5th we get the first inkling that he is contemplating the writing of *Journey*:

... read in Upham's library who has lent me several books to help me setting about my tour – if I do set about it ...

Benjamin Hobhouse – still without having come face to face with his son – relents to a degree and modifies his harsh conditions. On December 4th John Cam is reading a book about pirates:

Melancholy indeed at having no letter from Pater. Read at Uphams a deal of the lives of the Pyrates – full of the most strange instances of depravity – one of them going to be hanged, the executioner who was not used to it tied his hands behind – upon which the fellow observed – “Well, I have seen many a man hung but never in this way before”. They used to have mock trials – once a fellow personating the judge, with a pipe in his mouth, summ'd up on a prisoner in these words – “Gentlemen of the Jury, there are three reasons for hanging this prisoner: because it would be a shame if I were to sit here and nobody be hanged, secondly because he has a hanging look – thirdly, because I am hungry, and when the judge's dinner is ready hanging cuts short the matter and prevents it from the cooling.” I could not help laughing heartily at this, though I knew that upon the intelligence I should receive this night depended whether I should go hang. Dined at home. Went to Parry's at nine, trembling for the event, and found that the <XXXXXX> is not insisted on – but that I may go where I choose <XXXXXXXXXXXX>. Signed a paper promising to pay £4,000 by instalments of £300 after my father's decease – a load taken off my mind, as things seem in a better train.

On December 10th he moves across the Bristol Channel to Chepstow. He never reveals the reason for his move, not even to Byron, to whom he writes on this date (BB 57-62). He is starting seriously to research background for *Journey*. He borrows “Sonnini's travels in Greece and Turkey of which read the first volume”. This is an abridgement of *Voyages dans la Haut et Basse Egypte* by Charles Nicholas Sigisbert Sonnini de Mannoncourt (1800), a writer whom, in his second long note to *Childe Harold II* (CPW II 203), Byron wishes could be published with, and compared to, Thomas Thornton, Cornelius de Pauw, and William Eton. Hobhouse writes his preface and nine

opening pages, but is dissatisfied with his style, as Gibbon was with his initial opening to *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*:

... wrote a preface and nine pages of letters for Turkey. Reviewing them I fear they will never do – I cannot make them what I wish, polite, scholar-like, informed, and modern – the lucid order is wanting ...

On **December 22nd** he moves yet again, to St Arvans, two miles from Chepstow. He is waiting for a definite order from his father – whom he does not wish to see – to join the Royal Cornwall and Devon Miners. All the time he is reading, researching, and writing. On **December 28th** he reveals, having reported copying out a translation of the *Ars Poetica* by George Colman the Elder, to compare with his own, what may lie beneath his preoccupation and isolation: “I have certainly for several days felt a weakness of sight, a ringing (now) in my ear, and a weakness of intellect”. Hobhouse seems to think he may have contracted syphilis.

Despite this terror, he writes on for the first week of 1811, and reads Xenophon.

On **January 8th** his younger brother Henry, home from India, seeks him out in St Arvans. Hobhouse envies his learning, in Bengali, Persian, and Sanscrit, Latin and Greek. Henry stays until **January 14th**. On the **12th** and **20th** Hobhouse visits a slightly improbable St Arvans prostitute; on the **13th** the brothers visit Tintern Abbey, which Hobhouse finds “more beautiful than Greece”.

Still researching *Journey*, Hobhouse reads – for the first time – the letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montague, which he finds “very wicked!!!” As if discouraged by his envisaged failure in prose, he embarks seriously on *The Wonders of a Week at Bath*. He writes more and more of it as his prose work gets “worse and worse”. On **January 26th** he receives two letters from Byron (BLJ II 27-31 and 31-3). and writes him an answer, but does not send it.

At last, on **January 28th**, he receives orders from his father to go to Dover and join the militia. He reacts by copying five hundred lines of his *Bath* satire, though even as he does so he concedes that it is “poor stuff”. Still, he leaves St Arvans the following day, and, travelling via Bristol and Bath, reaches London on **February 2nd**, where he dines with David Baillie.

The complete diary entry for **February 4th** now says it all:

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Breakfast with Baillie and Davies at Tavistock ... book, three shillings ... called on my *father* at 11, Manchester Buildings, Westminster, and there, after a difference of five years standing, reconciled to him by shaking hands for one minute. This day to be marked with a white stone.

But Benjamin – though he is to provide John Cam with financial, political, and moral support for the rest of his long life – is no softie, and John Cam still has to do his time in the Cornwall and Devon Miners, and go careful with the expenditure. To show he's taken the lesson to heart, he goes to a *χαμαιτυπη* the following day, by way of celebration; but all he pays her is a shilling (on **February 7th** he pays £1 5d). The sums are small for London.

On **February 9th** he returns to Bath, where he sees Dorothy Jordan in her farewell, and sells 137 books, including his Shakespeare, for twenty-five guineas. He comes back to London, where on **February 20th** he receives his Captain's commission in the Miners. But he still has time to spare, and things to do. On **February 22nd** he sees the trial of Leigh Hunt for libelling the Prince Regent, and admires the eloquence of Henry Brougham, the defence counsel. At an interview on the same day with his step-mother and sister Charlotte, he confesses to being "foolish and maudlin". On **February 25th** he pays a prostitute eight shillings; on **February 26th**, thirteen shillings and sixpence. On **February 27th** he sees "three men hanged at Newgate" prior to embarking on the coach for Dover – with an illness in the bowels. At the Paris Hotel, Dover, he takes five grains of calomel to relieve it.

It seems that *The Wonders of a Week at Bath* has been published, although the diary is silent as to how and when. He receives a copy on **March 5th**, and "foretells a row" from it, though none is recorded. On the same day he is "Thrown into a fever by a letter from Davies hinting at some story he has to tell me": but we never learn what the story is about.

By this time he has joined the Miners, and doing so really does constitute the punishment his father intends. A light erasure fails to conceal: "the impenetrable dullness of these people makes it impossible to talk to them." No part of military life suits Hobhouse, except perhaps the incessant drinking. At an inspection, he confesses "I very awkward indeed – wrong foot". As if to compensate, he reads Hawkins' (not Boswell's) *Life of Johnson*, Johnson's own *Journey to the Western Islands* ("unnecessarily

turgid”) and *Candide*. He has a letter from Byron (BLJ II 26) on **March 15th**.

On **March 26th** he is disgusted to receive his first pay cheque – five guineas – and the following day loses a shilling of it – at whist! However, the day after that, the books arrive which enable him to start work again on *Journey*. They include Livy, Strabo, Knolles, and Gibbon.

On **April 8th** he dines with Sir Sidney Smith, by whose conversation he is impressed. “He longs for employment,” Hobhouse notes. From the letter he receives from Byron on **April 23rd** (BLJ II 31-3, 39, and 41-3.) he would have read that Byron had begun *an Imitation of the “De Arte Poetica,”* and that the two were thus in competition; but he withholds the fact from his diary.

Two days leave on **April 30th** are spent in Canterbury, Rochester and Chatham, with C.S. Matthews.

The prostitute he hires on **May 11th** costs him five and sixpence. Two days later we find him reading *Tartuffe*, with seeming empathy for Orgon, as would suit Byron’s “best friend”; though three days later he claims to find *L’Avare* ten times more pleasing.

On **May 17th** we read “regiment volunteered for Ireland”. For some time his life revolves around drunkenness, illness, inspections and dinners – all impenetrably dull, to judge from the absence of detail in his records of them. Leave brings him to London from **May 26th** to **June 9th** (“on the top of a coach”, to economise); on **May 27th** he meets Baillie, Matthews, and his father; and, on **May 28th**, the Prince Regent!

Went with Colonel Lemon to Carlton House and after waiting from three to a quarter before six amongst an immense crowd of *Lords and “Gentlemen”* kissed the Prince Regent’s hand, who muttered something I could not well hear. Dined at Imperial Coffee House. Went to ye Opera with Baillie and met a crowd of acquaintance.

On **May 30th** he finds compensation for the dullness of the Miners, when he attends the Royal Society’s weekly meeting, and meets Sir John Barrow, Sir Humphrey Davy and Sir Joseph Banks; and a meeting of the Antiquarian Society (although “nothing more ridiculous than such a piece of mummery” as the latter). That night the prostitute costs fourteen shillings. On **June 3rd**

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he meets Thomas Coke, and on the following day visits, for the first time, his father's house at Whitton Park, Hounslow. Here for the first time, on **June 6th**, we hear of Hobhouse's other brother, Benjamin, older than Henry – who will in 1815 be killed at Quatre Bras. One can sense John Cam's awe and envy again, as, in a letter, Benjamin

... gave an account of the conduct of his regiment, the fifty-seventh, at the battle of Albuera – they went into battle 572 rank and file – one lieutenant-colonel – one major – seven captains, eighteen subalterns – they fought four hours – and then drew up behind a hill to count numbers – they were then 118 rank and file and six subalterns. Ben and another officer were the only ones not scratched and without a hole in their clothes – the brigade went out of the field commanded by a junior captain and the regiment commanded by a junior lieutenant – Ben first commanded the light company and then held the colours, through which were eighteen shot holes –

On **June 9th**, Hobhouse returns to Dover, and the Miners. When off-duty he reads Gibbon. When on duty he is entertained by droll anecdotes:

On picket – A man recovered from drowning on opening his eyes said, “Bugger my eyes!” – and upon coming to his senses and being asked if he knew where he was, replied “Ask my arse!”

On **June 17th**, the prostitute demands five and sixpence – Hobhouse having prepared for the encounter by reading Gibbon. On **June 19th**, Benjamin consents to John Cam asking for leave to go to Cambridge to take his M.A., the two years since graduation needed by university regulations having expired. He needs a referee, and finds one in William Lort Mansel, previously Master of Trinity, now Bishop of Bristol (see Byron's epigrams at CPW I 226-7). He obtains leave on **June 24th**, and celebrates with a 10s 6d *χαμαιτυπη* that evening. Mansel sends his reference, which tells of “*talents of no ordinary cast*”! On **June 25th** he's off to Cambridge via London, travelling as previously on the outside of the coach. In London, he spends the evening at Sadler's Wells.

On the evening of **June 28th** Hobhouse attends a concert in the Senate House featuring Catalani and Braham. On **June 29th** there is a massive party in Trinity (Neville's Court) to celebrate the installation of the Duke of Gloucester as the new Vice-Chancellor:

... eight hundred persons round the cloisters, across the top, and the band in an open tent in the middle – ladies walking about the green – the whole an admirable faery effect – at ten at night a pretty fire work let off in the walks, and on the water with immense crowds – drank bottle of Claret with young Kinnaird ...

There is another Trinity dinner for the Duke on **July 1st**, with turtle and venison, before which Hobhouse spends time with Bankes, Matthews, and Baillie. On the 2nd he takes his M.A.Cantab., after which he dines in Trinity Hall with Bankes, and meets “Monk” Lewis. On **July 3rd**, William Sadler, the balloonist, ascends from Trinity Great Court. After ninety minutes aloft he comes down near, appropriately, Stansted. There is yet another meal for the Duke of Gloucester in Neville's Court – breakfast this time, with tickets at £14 – where Hobhouse is introduced to Edward Daniel Clarke and T.J.Matthias. He stays in Cambridge until **July 8th**, spending all of 19s 6d on ladies of the night, then goes back (“on Baillie's black mare”) to London where he sees Mrs Jordan in *The Country Girl*, then returns to Dover on **July 9th**, spending a pound on a prostitute the following day. On **July 8th** he hears from Byron.

He spends some time reading Pouqueville (“Pukeville”): then, on **July 14th**, he hears (BLJ II 59-60) that Byron is at Portsmouth! He appoints a meeting with him at Sittingbourne. The letter from Byron tells him again that Byron, too, has ready a version of the *Ars Poetica*, but adding, “in which you play the part of *both* the Pisos”; he makes no reference to this humiliation.

The friends meet at Sittingbourne on **July 17th**. Byron is accompanied by Demetrios Zograffos and Spiro Saraci; Demetrios is to be of ambivalent help to Hobhouse in writing the Albanian language sections of *Journey*. Tracing what will be the footsteps of Don Juan and Leila, they visit Canterbury

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Cathedral on **July 18th**, and part on **July 19th**. Their conversations are not recorded: a major disappointment, though we do get a glimpse of a possible subject matter: “none female nor under ten nor Turk”. Byron has brought Hobhouse’s Athenian marbles back for him.

From **July 21st** in Dover to his sojourn with the Miners in Ireland (orders to go there come on **July 24th**), Hobhouse is drinking, doing guard duty, and writing *Journey*. Late letters from Byron in the Mediterranean keep arriving. Two months’ pay for a Captain in the militia is £18 18s.

On **August 7th 1811**, two days before the regiment leaves, Hobhouse receives news of the death of Charles Skinner Matthews. The following text is surrounded by a thick black line:

Received from Scrope Berdmore Davies, the fatal news of the violent death of my oldest and best friend Charles Skinner Matthews – he was *drowned* in the *Cam* on Saturday last – wrote as well as I could to Scrope Berdmore Davies, to Lord Byron, and David Baillie – alas alas – who is there left? – my brother Henry the faithful partaker of my sorrow gone by this night’s mail – I feel this blow most grievously but not enough ... I knew one man at Westminster better than all the school besides ... Edward Vernon – he died – he whom I selected from all my manly acquaintance he is gone also – –

διεσκλαται παντα εριπται χαμαι
ουραι φερουτι τας παλαιας ελπιδας

The Greek (currently unidentified) means “He was thus broken in twain; he fell to earth and was dashed; the winds carried away the lost hopes.”

On **August 9th** the Royal Cornwall and Devon Miners leave for Ireland on the *Prince of Wales* transport ship.