

Byron's Wedding, December 24th-January 2nd 1815

Byron's Wedding*December 24th 1814-January 2nd 1815**Edited from B.L. Add. Mss. 47232*

Our suspicion that Hobhouse is crafting his diary for posterity even as he writes it, leaving out some very important bits, will be confirmed by certain details in his account of the separation in a year's time. Here, the information Annabella gives Lushington about what really transpired between Hobhouse and the vicar on the shore at Seaham throws the rest of his account of Byron's wedding into shocking relief.

But his depression at once again – and with apparent irrevocability – losing Byron to a member of the opposite sex, is all too clear from his desperate attempts at sight-seeing in the Sunderland and Durham area (of all places), once the honeymoon coach has departed for Halnaby.

Saturday December 24th 1814: I rode up to London and at twelve set off with Lord Byron on his matrimonial scheme. At Chesterford we parted – he for Six Mile Bottom,¹ and I for Cambridge. I found S.B.Davies and all my friends out of college, but dined at the Sun, where I slept.

Sunday December 25th 1814: I dined in Trinity College Hall. [At] dinner, Browne and Greenwood and Hailstone [were] the best there. At night I supped with a wine merchant, one Beales, with Browne² – a rare vulgar party – it is a wonder a man of Browne's mind can keep such company: but it is the only resource of a college life. I hear they have been throwing a collector of the property tax³ out of windows at St Ives.

Monday December 26th 1814: Byron did not arrive till three, when we set off, and went three stages to Wansford (in England)⁴ a capital inn. Never was lover in less haste.

¹: To visit Augusta. While there B. wrote a letter to Annabella calling off the engagement, but Augusta persuaded him not to send it. See *Marchand* II, 502-3.

²: The Reverend George Adam Browne (1774-1843) fellow of Trinity. The rest unidentified.

³: Note pending on the Property Tax and its attendant defenestrations.

Byron's Wedding, December 24th-January 2nd 1815

Tuesday December 27th 1814: Off at twelve – went as *far* as Newark⁵ in snow and rain.

Read the new Gibbon⁶ – delightful!! He proves that [the temple of] Janus was not a temple but an arcade with a Statue of Janus in the midst – and that it was the same as the Porta Triumphalis – hence the reason why the Geminae Portals were open in war, as then only was there a necessity for the passage of triumphal processions. [I] think he has not added that the double face of Janus strengthens this supposition, as the divinity might be supposed to look both to the advancing and passed procession, both to the country and to the city.⁷ The essay on the character of Brutus is conclusive⁸ – the patriot's transaction with Scaptius⁹ is worse than anything recorded of Verres.

The reading of this work miscellaneously gave me a literary ardour, and infused a sort of philosophic calm over me, to which I have been long a stranger. It is a useful book, as the pursuits and attainments of Gibbon are, though very noble and extensive, not absolutely without the reach of any lover of literature – the researches of Newton and the brilliancy of Voltaire are objects of admiration, but of despair.

<We travelled to Ferrybridge.> The bridegroom more and more *less* impatient – slept at the —

⁴: On the Great North Road, west of Peterborough. But there are no Wansfords in Scotland or Wales.

⁵: H's italic signifies that it's no great distance from Wansford to Newark.

⁶: *Miscellaneous Works of Edward Gibbon, Esq.*, edited by the Earl of Sheffield. Published 1814 by Murray.

⁷: H. is reading Vol. IV pp 388-394 (On the Triumphs of the Romans).

⁸: H. is reading Vol. IV pp. 95-111, an essay querying Brutus' stature as a republican hero.

⁹: "Spactius" (Ms.)

Byron's Wedding, December 24th-January 2nd 1815

Wednesday December 28th 1814: We travelled to, and slept at, Ferrybridge.

I read La Bruyère,¹⁰ who is a base flatterer of Louis XIV, and a bigot or a pretended bigot – he actually praises him for his persecution of the Huguenots.¹¹

Thursday December 29th 1814: We went as far as Thirsk today – indifference, almost aversion.¹²

Friday December 30th 1814: At eight o'clock in the evening we arrived at Seaham, Sir Ralph Milbanke's. Miss¹³ came to me when alone in the library, and with great frankness took me by the hand at once – presently in tottered her father – Miss is rather dowdy-looking and wears a long and high dress (as Byron had observed), though she has excellent feet and ankles. The lower part of her face is bad, the upper expressive but not handsome – yet she gains by inspection.

She heard Byron coming out of his room – ran to meet him – threw her arms round his neck and burst into tears!!¹⁴ She did this not before us. Lady Milbanke was so much agitated that she had gone to her room – our delay the cause – indeed, I looked foolish in finding out an excuse for our want of expedition. Miss, before us, was silent and modest, but very sensible and decent,¹⁵ and inspiring an interest which it is easy to mistake for love. With me she was frank and open, without little airs or affectations: of my friend she seemed dotingly fond, gazing with delight on his bold and animated bust¹⁶ – regulated however with the most entire decorum.

¹⁰: Jean de la Bruyère (1645-96) author of *Theophrastus Les caractères avec les caractères, ou les mœurs de ce siècle* (1688). An English edition (in French was published in 1784).

¹¹: La Bruyère at no point writes this though his opinion about ideological opponents may be inferred from the 1784 edition, Vol. II, pp. 103-136 (*Du Souverain, ou de la République*).

¹²: Last phrase omitted from *Recollections* (I 192).

¹³: *Recollections* (I 192-4) has "Miss Milbanke" throughout this entry.

¹⁴: I read H.'s subscripted inverted commas here as an aborted pair of exclamation marks.

¹⁵: *Recollections* (I 193) has "sensible and quiet".

¹⁶: *Recollections* (I 193) has "animated face".

Byron's Wedding, December 24th-January 2nd 1815

Byron loves her when present, and, *personally*, as it is easy for those used to such indications to observe. Old Sir Ralph is an honest, red-faced spirit, a little prosy but by no means devoid of humour. My lady who has been a dasher in her day, and has ridden the grey mare,¹⁷ is pettish and tiresome, but clever ... both are dotingly fond of Miss ...

There were in the house a family of Mr Hoare of Durham, confidential counsel and agent of Sir Ralph Milbanke, and the Reverend Thomas Noel, Rector of Kirkby Mallory and illegitimate son of Lord Wentworth, Miss Milbanke's uncle maternal, a buck parson of the better sort. Byron won his heart by his kindness and open manner.

Sir Ralph & co. told stories.¹⁸ Sir Ralph said that Moore, Archbishop of Canterbury,¹⁹ informed him that he had changed the archepiscopal signature from "Cant" to "Cantuar" because he wished to avoid the mistakes which the bad writing of his predecessor Cornwallis²⁰ had caused the readers of his processes to commit. Of the Bishop of Durham, Shute,²¹ he told that the Bishop, when a tutor at Oxford, said to Lord Hampden,²² "The friendship which I have for my Lord your father – my respect for my Lord the Bishop your uncle – and the peculiar situation in which I stand with my Lord *God*," &c. Also, that Shute desired some young man not to call his task an "imposition" – "You're a man of family, Sir, a man of family – call it a literary transaction between two men of fashion".

¹⁷: The meaning of this phrase is not clear to me.

¹⁸: H. made an impact on the gathering, too. On January 10th, Thomas Noel's daughter Mary wrote to her friend Henrietta Jervis: "Lord B[Byron] brought a friend (Mr. Hobhouse) with him to be present at the ceremony, this gentleman Papa found to be very entertaining, he has been a great traveller, and has a fund of good sense and information and so goodhumoured that he is never so happy as when he can amuse others with the description of his travels which he clothes in such pleasing language that Papa says he could never be tired of listening to him. Mr Hobhouse gave Papa the highest character of Lord Byron, he told him he was generous, had great sensibility, and had the most noble and exalted sentiments, and had related many instances of the goodness of his heart ..." (LBW 249 n2). Compare 31 Dec 1814 or 1 Jan 1815.

¹⁹: John Moore was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1783 to 1805.

²⁰: Frederick Cornwallis was Archbishop of Canterbury from 1768 to 1783.

²¹: Shute Barrington was Bishop of Durham from 1791 to 1826.

²²: John Hampden-Trevor (1749-1824) third Viscount Hampden.

Byron's Wedding, December 24th-January 2nd 1815

A gentleman who has lately seen Napoleon told Hoare that Napoleon said to him, "There are three generals in the world – myself, Lord Wellington, and that drunkard Blucher".²³

Byron told me, that one day at dinner, Lady Caroline Lamb²⁴ said to George Lamb, "George – what's the seventh commandment? *Thou shalt not bother.*"²⁵ Also that when the late Duchess of Devonshire²⁶ was dying in Devonshire House – Lady Morpeth²⁷ was carried into a bedchamber in convulsions, but was interrupted by a voice from the curtains which exclaimed "Don't come here! Wil-hi-am is here!" Wil-hi-am²⁸ said not a word. This was at two in the afternoon.

Saturday December 31st 1814:²⁹ I walked on the seashore, which is close to the mansion house of Seaham – the sight of the waters had an indescribable effect upon me – it was a fine sunshiney day. I had some private talk with Hoare³⁰ and Miss Milbanke on Lord Byron's affairs, and I began to entertain doubts of Hanson's *probity*. The young woman is most attractive – we had a dinner, at six, and jollified a little upon the signing of the settlements, which was done in the morning. I put my name to a deed

²³: Waterloo has yet to be fought.

²⁴: "Lambe" (Ms.)

²⁵: It is not clear from H.'s punctuation whether Caroline, or her brother-in-law, provided the answer. *Recollections* (I 194) gives the joke to George.

²⁶: Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire (1757-1806), compulsive gambler.

²⁷: Lady Morpeth was the Duchess's daughter.

²⁸: "Wil-hi-am" was presumably the Duke of Devonshire (William Cavendish).

²⁹: About either the 31st or the 1st, H. may be being guarded. On 19 Feb 1816 – in the middle of the separation proceedings – Annabella wrote to Dr Lushington, her lawyer: "Dear Sir / I have had some information as to Mr Hobhouse which I consider of importance – When he came down to Seaham with Lord Byron at the time of my marriage, a day or two previous to it, – he spoke in terms of strong reprobation of Lord Byron – to Mr Noel, the Clergyman by whom I was married – wishing *him* to break off the match – and saying that those persons were much to blame who trusted their child with such a man, speaking particularly of his *violence* as being *unsafe*. This has just been repeated to me from a quarter which I cannot doubt – – – The day, one after my marriage, Lord Byron – said to me, 'Hobhouse knows I am a Villain' – Mr Noel said it was too late – and declined interference – From this fact I leave you to draw inferences" – (DLB 88, 25). H. is unlikely to have made such a gesture without B.'s instigation.

³⁰: William Hoare was the Milbankes' attorney and business agent.

Byron's Wedding, December 24th-January 2nd 1815

which is to provide for the younger children of the marriage – my coadjutor is Sir Thomas Liddell.³¹

I talked and talked in the evening, which concluded jollily with a mock marriage, *I* being Lady Byron, *Noel* parsonifying, and Hoare giving me away. Shook hands for a new year.

Sunday January 1st 1815: Walked on the shore. The Hoares left us. We had not quite so jolly a dinner as yesterday, but tolerable, considering Byron at night said, “Well, Hobhouse, this is our last night to morrow I shall be Annabella’s” – (absit omen!!)³²

Monday January 2nd 1815: I dressed in full dress with white gloves, and found Byron up and dressed, with Noel³³ in canonicals. Lady Milbanke [and] Sir Ralph soon came, also dressed. Her ladyship could not make tea. Her hand shook. Miss did not appear – the Reverend Wallis³⁴ came in, also in canonicals – at half-past ten we parted company. Byron and I went to his room – the others upstairs. In ten minutes we walked up into the drawing-room and found kneeling-mats disposed for the couple, and the others. The two clergymen, the father and mother and myself were in waiting, when Miss Milbanke came in attended by her governess, the respectable Miss Clermont.³⁵ She was dressed in a muslin gown trimmed with lace at the bottom, with a white muslin *curricie* jacket, very plain indeed, with nothing on her head. Noel was decent and grave – he put them, Byron and Miss, opposite their cushions. Lady Milbanke placed Sir Ralph next to his daughter. I stood next to Sir Ralph; my lady and Mrs Clermont were rather opposite in the corner. Wallis read the responses.

Miss Milbanke was as firm as a rock, and during the whole ceremony looked steadily at Byron – she repeated the words audibly and well. Byron

³¹: Sir Thomas Henry Liddell (1775-1855) subsequently Lord Ravensworth; son of Lady Noel's friend Lady Elizabeth Liddell. See LLB 63n.

³²: “May this omen” (leave-taking) “be far from us”. Compare 4 Dec 1816.

³³: B. and Annabella were married by the Reverend Thomas Noel, Rector of Kirkby Mallory. He was Annabella's cousin, the illegitimate son of Lord Wentworth, her maternal uncle.

³⁴: “Wallace” (Ms.) Richard Wallis, Vicar of Seaham.

³⁵: Mrs Clermont was to be the subject of B.'s vicious poem *A Sketch from Private Life*.

Byron's Wedding, December 24th-January 2nd 1815

hitched at first when he said "I, George Gordon", and when he came to "with all my worldly goods I thee endow", looked at me with a half-smile – they were married at eleven. I shook Lady Byron by the hand after the parson, and embraced my friend with unfeigned delight – he was kissed by my lady Milbanke – Lady Milbanke and Mrs Clermont were much affected. Lady Byron went out of the room, but soon returned to sign the register, which Wallis and I witnessed. She again retired hastily, her eyes full of tears when she looked at her father and mother, and completed her conquest, her innocent conquest.

She came in her travelling dress, worn after a slate-coloured satin – pellice trimmed with white fur – and sat quietly in the drawing-room – Byron was calm and as usual I felt I had buried a friend.

I put a complete collection of Byron's poems bound in orange morocco into the carriage for Lady Byron as a wedding gift – it was inscribed thus:

To the Right Honourable
Lady Byron

These volumes, the production of a poet the admiration of his countrymen, the delight of his associates, & the approved choice of her understanding and her heart are presented as a sincere token of congratulation on her union with his best friend by her faithful & devoted ser[vant]

John C. Hobhouse"³⁶

At a little before twelve I handed Lady Byron downstairs and into her carriage. When I wished her many years of happiness she said, "If I am not happy it will be my own fault". Of my dearest friend I took a melancholy leave – he was unwilling to leave my hand, and I had hold of his out of the window when the carriage drove off.

³⁶: In fact H. added the place, and the date in words: "Seaham January the second one thousand eight hundred and fifteen – " (the two volumes are now in the Houghton Library, Harvard).

Byron's Wedding, December 24th-January 2nd 1815

I left Seaham at twelve. Lady Milbanke asked me if she had not behaved well – as if she had been the mother of Iphigenia.³⁷ It is not wonderful that the mother of an only daughter and child born seventeen years after marriage³⁸ should cause a pang at parting.

Whilst at Seaham we saw the sword dance of the colliers,³⁹ a singular custom / exhibition, begun and ended by a sort of pantomime games led by a pantaloon and fool, who ends by having his head cut off. The great address consists of the parties uniting themselves by holding their swords at each end, and going through all the contortions without letting them go. The business is opened with a song, which is to be found in the *Tyne Melodies*,⁴⁰ and by a slow circular procession, dictated and controlled by the fool and pantaloon – the cutting off the head we did not see. The men are about ten in number, fantastically dressed, and although it is a Christmas, sport in their shirts.

The little bells of Seaham church struck up after the wedding, and half-a-dozen fired muskets in front of the house. The couple went to Halnaby,⁴¹ Sir Ralph Milbanke's estate in Yorkshire.

³⁷: The mother of the sacrificial victim Iphigenia was Clytemnestra – a name B. subsequently gave Annabella. See *Lines On Hearing That Lady Byron Was Ill*, 37.

³⁸: In fact Lady Milbanke had had Annabella after fifteen years of marriage, in 1792 at the age of forty.

³⁹: This virtuoso sword-dance is performed in a number of British folk-celebrations.

⁴⁰: Song collection otherwise unidentified. Chris Little suggests *Sword Dancers* from *A Selection of the most popular Melodies of the Tyne and the Wear*, comp. Robert Topliff (Holborn, London, 1815):

<http://www.asaplive.com/archive/detail.asp?id=F0103702>

According to John Stokoe, in the *Chronicles for 1887*, Christmas performances in Northumberland and Durham were undertaken by groups of around a dozen pitmen who, each with a sword by his side and clad in white shirts decorated in ribbons, travelled to the towns to perform a traditional play to song and music. The captain of the group, who traditionally wore a cocked hat and peacock's feathers, was attended by a 'clown or bessy', who acted as treasurer and collected the money. The captain then formed a circle, round which he walked; the Bessy opened the proceedings by singing the first verse, the captain followed by introducing the various characters in succeeding verses. The dance then followed. The ceremony concluded with a general dance to the tune of 'Kitty Bo-Bo'.

⁴¹: "Hannaby" (Ms.)

Byron's Wedding, December 24th-January 2nd 1815

I went in a post-chaise to Sunderland and saw the iron bridge,⁴² which is indeed an incomparable structure – its span is 263 feet, its width 32, its height from the water 100. It cost £36,000, one third the cost of a stone bridge, and lets for £2,375 per annum. It is remarkable that when it was opened in 1796, the ferry across the Wear did not let for less money than before, and now lets for double its former value. The bridge opens a communication between Sunderland, Shields, and Newcastle – carriages pay half a crown – foot-passengers a halfpenny. The property, which belongs to Mr Burdon, the bankrupt member for Durham,⁴³ is now to be raffled for.

Lady Milbanke told me that in July and August last, 3,700 colliers cleared out of the port of Sunderland.⁴⁴ The population of the place is about 36,000. I went fifteen miles to Durham, and put up at the cheapest inn in England.⁴⁵ I walked about on the beautiful banks of the river, and saw the open court of justice,⁴⁶ which until two years [ago] was used here – it is very “foolish and rheumatic”, as a Mr Darnell,⁴⁷ a clever clergyman who, with Parson Noel, walked about with me, observed.

I dined at Mr Hoare's, Sir Ralph and Lady Milbanke with Noel, Darnell, the Lord Barrington,⁴⁸ a gold prebend⁴⁹ and others, at a sort of wedding-dinner. I talked incessantly, and badly, and drank too much port, impelled by Noel, who is a good fellow.

⁴²: Until its replacement in 1928, this was the longest single-span iron bridge in the country. Designed by Thomas Wilson, and erected under an act of parliament obtained by

⁴³: Rowland Burdon, MP for Durham, who had entered Westminster with Sir Ralph Milbanke in 1790.

⁴⁴: The peril of the work, the haphazard nature of the contract laws and the brutality of the combination laws made mining an unpopular profession, in Durham as elsewhere. The militia were frequently called in to quell strikes.

⁴⁵: Economical hostelry unidentified.

⁴⁶: The open court-house at Durham was on a rise of ground near the racecourse, by the river. It was within sight of the cathedral, the castle, and most importantly the jail.

⁴⁷: Mr Darnell otherwise unidentified.

⁴⁸: Sir Matthew Barrington (1788-1861) Irish baronet.

⁴⁹: Conjectural reading.