

RECORDS OF SHELLEY,  
BYRON, AND THE AUTHOR

Edward John Trelawny



*Introduction by*

ANNE BARTON

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## INTRODUCTION

IN THE AUTUMN of 1821, Edward John Trelawny left Geneva for Italy, where in the following January he briefly became part of the little circle of English expatriates at Pisa: Lord Byron, Shelley and his wife Mary, Shelley's cousin Thomas Medwin, Edward Williams (who, like Medwin, had been a British army officer in India) and Williams's partner Jane. Trelawny himself was thirty, the same age as Shelley, but four years younger than Byron. He later claimed that it had been his discovery of Shelley's poetry, quite as much as a desire to meet Byron, that induced him to act on the Williamses' suggestion that he join them in Pisa. Like a good deal else in *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* (1878), this was almost certainly not true. Byron, rather than the comparatively obscure Shelley, was the real magnet. Trelawny was attracted to him, moreover, for reasons more complicated and personal than simply the great international celebrity at this time of the self-exiled author of *Childe Harold*, *Don Juan*, and the various Eastern tales.

In the eyes not only of his upper-class Cornish family, but of the school from which he had been expelled, as well as the British navy, which found him so intractable that it discharged him after a few years without a commission, not to mention his wife (the first of three), who had humiliatingly left him for

another and much older man, Trelawny in 1822 was an almost unmitigated failure. He eked out his existence on the continent because the slender paternal allowance remitted to this unsatisfactory younger son was insufficient to support him in England. For assets, he appeared to possess only a commanding (and intensely masculine) physical appearance, an iron constitution to match, and the ability, frequently exercised, to annihilate with his gun any game bird or animal from a considerable distance.

But there were hidden depths in Trelawny. He had an extraordinary imagination, focused for the most part upon himself. It had been fueled and extended, furthermore, between his ignominious departure from the navy in 1812 and his arrival at Pisa, by rapturous immersion in the earlier "romantic" works of Byron. Whether or not it was true that he habitually slept with a copy of Byron's verse tale *The Corsair* under his pillow, it was certainly the case that he came to model himself upon the hero of this and similar Byronic fictions: dark, violent, a man of strange adventures and hairbreadth escapes in little-known parts of the world. By 1822, he was well embarked on the creation of a whole spurious past history for himself, one in which he had not only been a pirate, like Byron's Conrad, but had stabbed tigers to death, rescued beautiful Arab maidens, and savagely avenged himself on anyone so foolhardy as to cross him. (He was later to incorporate these detailed fabrications in his 1831 autobiography, *Adventures of a Younger Son*, by which time it is even possible that he believed them himself.)

The one person at Pisa who appears to have seen through Trelawny's tall tales completely was Byron himself. He was friendly—indeed, seems to have liked "the Pirate," as he called him—and encouraged him to come along in 1823, when the Pisan circle had broken up after the deaths of Williams and Shelley, and Byron went to fight in the Greek War of Independ-

ence. Too many people, however, recorded versions of Byron's quip that Trelawny could not tell the truth to save his life (any more than he could manage to spell, or wash his hands) for such observations not to be resented by their subject when, afterward, he came upon them in print. They explain, but only in part, that animus against the long-dead Byron so evident in *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*.

Trelawny had come to Pisa to see the creator of poems he loved, and with which he identified himself—*The Corsair*, *Lara*, or *The Giaour*—but found himself confronted by the mature Byron of *Don Juan*: witty, ironic, and largely dismissive of these earlier works. Instinctively, Trelawny turned to Shelley, with whom indeed he seems to have fallen a little in love: the slender, absent-minded, apparent stripling, looking much younger than his age, who could neither swim, box, nor handle a boat, and who possessed nothing like Byron's physical prowess, or fame. Shelley's idealism and metaphysics were beyond Trelawny's ken, but it was almost certainly from him, and at this point, that he imbibed both the militant atheism and the radical politics signaled in his book.

Trelawny published the initial version of *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* in 1858, under the title *Recollections of Shelley and Byron*. By 1878, "Recollections" had hardened into "Records," and Trelawny (now almost ninety) was claiming equal billing with the two famous poets. And indeed, he had become something of a celebrity, a living link for Victorians with the Shelley whose star was now in the ascendant, and with the Byron no one could forget, even though his poetic reputation had declined.

Trelawny was also, as many people knew, the heroic survivor of an assassination attempt at that extraordinary fortress cave, the Mavre Troupa, high in the cliffs of Mount Parnassus, where in 1825, as an associate of the repulsive Greek chieftain Odysseus Androutsos, he had briefly been the commandant in

charge. (This bizarre narrative, for once, was true, Trelawny actually living one of his fantasies, even if his activities on Parnassus—unlike Byron's patient, unglamorous negotiations at Missolonghi, upon which Trelawny poured scorn—scarcely impinged upon the course of the Greek Revolution.) He also made various alterations to the body of his text, and added a considerable amount of new material, much of it in dialogue form. In these recorded conversations, mostly but by no means entirely with Shelley or Byron, Trelawny (predictably) gets to score most of the points. Like the book as a whole, they hover tantalizingly between fiction and fact.

Trelawny was not a lovable man. He lacked either humor or compassion; his egotism was colossal, and he displayed throughout his life an almost pathological addiction to violence. (In the first episode he chose to remember from his childhood, he is brutally killing his father's pet raven.) His treatment of women, including his child bride, Tersitza, and his third wife, Lady Augusta Goring, was deplorable. From the sneers at Mary Shelley in the *Records*, as both a person and a writer, one would not guess that he claimed to be in love with her, after Shelley's death, and even proposed marriage, or that she had given him vital help in preparing and publishing *Adventures of a Younger Son*. He was, however, a remarkable person, whose life turned out in many ways to be more singular and interesting than those fantasies from which it can never be entirely disentangled. His book is compulsively readable, and not just because its material is so good.

With considerable help from others, Trelawny did finally master spelling and punctuation. The prose of *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author* is vivid, economical, and taut. He also contrives to mingle description and narrative with dialogue, letters, and retrospects in a fashion less haphazard than it may initially seem. Those set pieces that everyone who has read the book remembers are carefully placed: the Mavre

Troupa cave; Shelley's charmingly unabashed appearance at one of his wife's dinner parties, stark naked after a sea bath; the burning of Williams's and Shelley's bodies on the beach at Via Reggio; Trelawny's surreptitious inspection of the feet of Byron's corpse; or his detailed account of what he saw in the narrow gorge of Dervenakia some months after several thousand Turks, with their horses, mules, and camels, had been massacred there by the Greeks, and their bones picked by vultures. These episodes are often unsettling. Trelawny can calmly recount how at Dervenakia "the skeletons of some bold riders who had attempted to scale the acclivities [were] still astride the skeletons of their horses," without expressing horror, let alone pity. It is as though he were re-creating Byron's poem "The Destruction of Sennacherib," rather than responding to an actual atrocity. Nor does he feel the least shame about his prurient examination of Byron's body. Such emotions were not natural to him.

In the end, although Trelawny tells us almost as much about himself as about Shelley and Byron, without him a good deal about the last phase of their lives, and about the Greek War of Independence, would have been lost. That is important, even if his statements continually need to be checked, or set against other contemporary evidence. Teresa Guiccioli, for instance, Byron's last mistress, who certainly ought to have known, protested vehemently that Trelawny's original description, in *Recollections*, of both Byron's feet as clubbed and his legs "withered to the knee" was entirely untrue. That may be why, in the later version of the book, he radically altered his account (Byron's feet become perfect, all the trouble lying in a contraction of the Achilles tendons), without troubling to explain how he could have seen two such contradictory things on the same occasion. Did he, in fact, see either? But then, as Byron wrote, not entirely seriously, in Canto XI of *Don Juan*, "after all, what is a lie? 'Tis but/The truth in

## Introduction

masquerade." That might serve as an epigraph for *Records of Shelley, Byron, and the Author*: a book which offers, among its many other pleasures, that of trying to glimpse the reality behind all of Trelawny's false faces.

—ANNE BARTON

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RECORDS OF SHELLEY,  
BYRON, AND THE AUTHOR

EDWARD JOHN TRELAWNY (1792–1881) was born into a well-established family from Cornwall. He passed a miserable childhood, and at the age of thirteen was enrolled by his father in the British navy. Discharged without a commission after a decade, Trelawny found his way to Italy, where he became part of the circle of expatriates around Byron and Shelley. He fought in the Greek War of Independence, during which he survived an assassination attempt, and wrote a notoriously unreliable but enormously successful autobiography, *Adventures of a Younger Son*, as well as his celebrated reminiscences of Shelley and Byron. Trelawny is buried beside Shelley in the English Cemetery in Rome.

ANNE BARTON is a Professor of English at Cambridge University and a Fellow of Trinity College. Her books include *Byron: 'Don Juan' and Essays, Mainly Shakespearian*.