TWO VIEWS OF BYRON

BYRON: THE LAST JOURNEY. *By Harold Nicolson, 12mo. 288 pages. Houghton Mifflin Company. $4.*

THE POLITICAL CAREER OF LORD BYRON. *By Dora Neill Raymond. 12mo. 363 pages. Henry Holt and Company.*

MISS RAYMOND has written an interesting book on Byron's political career from the conventional point of view of the admiring biographer. For her, all of Byron's parliamentary speeches, political lampoons, and revolutionary activities in Italy and Greece were the result of wise and well considered opinions. For her, his motives are invariably generous, disinterested, and honest. The question of his unsteady and complex character does not arise for her at all. To take a single example, in discussing Byron's hatred of the radicals, she describes the squib he wrote upon his friend Hobhouse's relations with them as "a rollicking and somewhat sarcastic ballad"—whereas it is perhaps more likely to seem to a reader of the ballad in question and of Byron's letters dealing with this period that he had merely given vent to his own irritation at the aimlessness of his life in Italy and his envy at his friend's achievements in England by an outburst less rollicking and sarcastic than jeering and ill-natured. Furthermore, it seems clear that Byron's hatred of oppression and ready sympathy with the unfortunate was somehow bound up with what would be called nowadays a sort of "inferiority complex"; but Miss Raymond takes his exalted position and virtue on trust and fails to understand his real social and personal situation.

Mr Harold Nicolson, on the other hand, understands these matters only too well. Mr Nicolson is a pupil of the school of Strachey and has learned the whole technique of hounding down the idiosyncrasies and personal imperfections which fix the shape of spectacular public careers. This enables him, if not to reproduce the successes of the Master, at least to write such a passage as the following, which comes nearer to arriving at the truth about Byron than a biography in Miss Raymond's vein can do:

"It must be realized that the life of Byron is not, as has often been imagined, a series of wasted opportunities; rather is it a catalogue of false positions. His brain was male, his character was feminine. He had genius, but it was misunderstood and misdirected; he had beauty, but it was branded by deformity; he had rank, but no position; fortune, but it came too late; fame, but it blazed for him too early. From his childhood the foreground of his life had been out of focus with the background; throughout his career this error of focus marred the sincerity, the completeness, and even the meaning of the whole."

Yet the Strachey formula has come to have its penalties as well as its rewards: one of these is the use or the excessive use of irony where it is not really appropriate. There is a point in Strachey's own irony: as Mr Clive Bell has pointed out, Strachey's ironic treatment of the Victorian age implies a comparative study of the whole history of society. He does not write about Madame du Deffand or Racine in the same vein as Florence Nightingale or Dr Arnold. Even in Eminent Victorians, where he is most cruel and perhaps most unfair, his efforts are directed toward compelling us to accept a certain definite point of view. Now the chief danger of his disciples has been in adopting his tone without understanding his point of view: Mr Philip Guedalla has become perhaps the worst offender in this regard. Mr Guedalla is full of ironic inflections and invidious details which, upon being closely examined, turn out to have no significance. And Mr Nicolson, in writing of Byron, is not entirely free from the same vice. " 'Our visit was a long one,' records Lady Blessington. It was. They sat in the large, cool room, et cetera." Now what is there ridiculous about the fact that Lady Blessington's visit to Byron should have been long? Why does Mr Nicolson write "It was" in such a sly knowing fashion? For no other reason on earth than that he has caught the tone from Mr Strachey. There is some room for irony, to be sure, in any biography of a hero whose reputation has been swollen by so much romantic nonsense as Byron's has; yet I am inclined to believe that, except in his preface, Mr Nicolson has bent a little too far over backwards in his endeavour to avoid the legend. For after all, the legend was a reality as much as Byron's effeminate voice, which Mr Nicolson is so unwilling to have us forget.

"That in this sudden ferment of unexpected adulation Byron should have been manoeuvred into adopting the postures which were expected of him was perhaps inevitable. . . . [The provoking spectre of Childe Harold] thrust upon him the exacting function of being a very dangerous and enterprising man. His slightest civility was interpreted as a seduction; his chance encounters became assignations. They persisted, all of them, in taking him at his word. For a man who, although kindly and sentimental, was only adequately sexed, all this became extremely exhausting."

Yet Byron himself had created Childe Harold and his postures and more than half believed in them: he believed in them and made others believe in them and they thus became actual values, which Mr Nicolson should have brought on the stage. "Kindly and sentimental" is a quite inadequate description of Byron in his relations with women: on the contrary, he seems always to have been ready to flare, if only momentarily, into a romantic devotion, and to have been able to inject into even the most unpromising of his love affairs a mood or two of passionate conviction. Even from his half-humorous daily bulletins to Lady Melbourne, it is plain that he pursued his mistresses with an anxiety and an energy considerably more than "kindly and sentimental" and one can scarcely doubt that he availed himself of the grand manner for even those who pursued him. Mr Nicolson, in writing about Byron with Childe Harold left out, has illustrated the un-humanistic point of view to which Stracheyism is likely to lead. If a critic be too wary of taking the figures of history and the heroes of literature at their own valuation and that of their contemporaries, he is likely to miss the point altogether. Every age has its complacent failures of intelligence and we have learned to laugh at the "reasonable" point of view of the eighteenth century and the moral one of the nineteenth, but it looks as if this new sort of ironic belittlement were likely to become characteristic of our own. What should be most interesting at any time is to find out to what reality of human history Childe Harold corresponded.

For the rest, Miss Raymond's book is an agreeable and useful one and Mr Nicolson's an extremely vivid and amusing one, which has far more of his own in it than his preceding biography of Tennyson, in which, as if for a literary exercise, he paraphrased the

whole last page of Queen Victoria. Confining itself, as it does, to the last year of Byron's life, it necessarily falls short of being satisfactory as a full-length portrait of Byron and indeed simply presupposes on the part of the reader a knowledge of most of what has gone before; but of that last year he makes an excellent narrative, especially satisfactory for its use of unpublished documents and for its first-hand knowledge of Greece. Both books are of a sort particularly valuable in connexion with Byron. For Byron presents a peculiar case in literature: he was not a great literary artist and we can appreciate his real merits and understand why it was possible for Arnold to speak in one breath of "Goethe's sage mind and Byron's force" only when we have familiarized ourselves with both his works and his life. What we realize then and what both Miss Raymond's and Mr Nicolson's book help us to realize is the knowledge of Europe and of the world, the consciousness of the stage upon which he was playing, that make him remarkable among modern Englishmen; the generous impulses and ideas which compensated his errors and his shortcomings; and the indefatigable capacity for experience so satisfactory in contrast to the race of literary men who have succeeded him and who have diverted the security and regularity of their existences by turning out so many novels and poems.

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