

Lake Geneva as Shelley and Byron Knew It

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SWITZERLAND is rarely thought of as a wild artistic center. Most of us recall the harsh verdict of Harry Lime, the character played by Orson Welles in “The Third Man,” who declared that the country’s most creative achievement was the cuckoo clock.

It wasn’t always so.

A few centuries ago, Europe’s most adventurous bohemians flocked to Lake Geneva on the Swiss-French border to savor its inspiring mountain scenery and liberal political climate. The most notorious group arrived from England in May 1816, led by the 28-year-old celebrity poet George Gordon, Lord Byron. Having earned the moniker “mad, bad and dangerous to know,” thanks to his debauched behavior and operatic romances with men and women (including his half-sister, Augusta), he was fleeing England in the wake of a scandalous separation from his wife.

His mode of transport was a replica of Napoleon’s coach, and with him were a bevy of footmen, his personal physician (an emotionally troubled young doctor with a bookish bent named John Polidori), a peacock, a monkey and a dog. He and his entourage were met in Geneva by a fellow group of literary wanderers helmed by the struggling poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, who, by the age of 23, had gained his own notoriety in England as an advocate of atheism and free love. He was accompanied by his brilliant and beautiful 18-year-old mistress, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin (she married Shelley later that year), and her alluring stepsister, Claire Claremont. (Also 18, she had been Byron’s lover back in England, and for a time, Shelley’s; it was Claire who had orchestrated the holiday meeting in Switzerland when she heard that Byron was traveling there).

Byron and Shelley got on famously and soon decided to rent adjacent summer houses in the hamlet of Coligny, about four miles north of Geneva. Byron took a grandiose villa with his doctor and servants, while Shelley, Mary and Claire settled into a more humble house by the lakefront.

The coterie was “the most brilliant and romantic circle of poets, writers and personalities which Switzerland — and Europe — has ever seen,” wrote the historian Elma Dangerfield in “Byron and the Romantics in Switzerland, 1816.” The claim may be a little overblown, but there is no question that it was a dazzling alignment of talent. When the group wasn’t sailing on Lake Geneva or making horseback excursions to medieval castles in the Alps, they were writing. That summer produced Mary Shelley’s Gothic classic “Frankenstein, Or, the Modern Prometheus”; an array of revered poems from Byron including “The Prisoner of Chillon”; and a sinister short story called “The Vampyre,” written by John Polidori and inspired by Byron, which would years later influence Bram Stoker’s “Dracula.”

HOPING to get a sense of how Lake Geneva inspired such creativity, I spent a week last summer tracking down some of the places in which the Romantic poets spent their time — a task that entailed visiting one ravishing lakeside village after another.

But for me, it was the legacy of Byron and the Shelleys — and the juxtaposition of such larger-than-life characters in such a pristine buttoned-down place that gave Lake Geneva its most powerful allure.

Mary Shelley raved in her letters about the near-tropical color of the lake, “blue as the heavens which it reflects,” and used an array of scenes from Lake Geneva in “Frankenstein.”

After a two-hour boat ride and 20-minute hop by train, I arrived in downtown Geneva, now home to United Nations bureaucrats and bankers. Back in 1816, Byron and Shelley had seen no reason to linger here; Byron complained in a letter that he was followed about his hotel garden by “staring boobies” — or, more politely, English tourists. So the two groups relocated to the secluded farming village of Coligny near Geneva — Byron to

the spectacular Villa Diodati and the Shelleys to the more modest Maison Chapuis just below.

The gate was open, so I blithely strolled into the estate intending to knock on the door. As I drew near, I could easily imagine the bohemians of 1816 gathering by candlelight in the upstairs dining room to debate and carouse. Byron's initial resistance to resuming his affair with the dark-eyed Claire did not last long. ("I never loved her nor pretended to love her," he later wrote, "but a man is a man — & if a girl of eighteen comes prancing to you at all hours — there is but one way.") Sexual tensions festered as Dr. Polidori fell in love with Mary, and wild rumors began to spread among English visitors to Geneva. Curiosity seekers passed by in boats to peer at the women's underwear on the washing lines — evidence, it was believed, that the Villa Diodati was a virtual bordello. Others would stop Byron on his evening rides to accuse him of corrupting the local girls and youth. The whole Swiss setup, one British newspaper reported back in London, was a sordid "league of incest."

But the summer of 1816 was historic not only in a literary sense. A huge volcanic eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia in 1815 (far more powerful than Krakatoa would be 68 years later) sent a pall of volcanic ash across the Northern Hemisphere, bringing so much cold weather and torrential rain to Europe that 1816 was nicknamed "the Year Without a Summer." In Switzerland, it was mid-June when the freakishly bad weather began — "an almost perpetual rain," Mary recalled, with terrific thunderstorms rippling back and forth across the lake. Wine flowed copiously, as did laudanum, a form of liquefied opium. One night, when Byron read aloud a haunting poem, Shelley leapt up and ran shrieking from the room, having hallucinated that Mary had sprouted demonic eyes in place of nipples. It was in this surreal, claustrophobic atmosphere that she experienced the famous nightmare that became the lurid plot of *Frankenstein* (she later recounted in the preface to the 1831 edition of her book), about a scientist who creates a creature from stolen body parts and infuses it with life. The next night, she told the gloomy fable in the Villa Diodati to a rapt audience.

AS visitors do today, Byron and his cohort loved to explore the lake. When the rain finally eased, Shelley and Byron set sail for a weeklong literary pilgrimage of their own. The first stop was the village of Clarens, where the most beloved novel of their era, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's epistolary love story, "Julie, or the New Héloïse" was composed and set. In Lausanne, they paid their respects at the house of Edward Gibbon, where he penned his revered epic history, "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire." (It was already a ruin, and would be knocked down in 1896 for the Lausanne post office). On their way home, the pair were caught in a storm that broke their rudder and nearly sank their boat — presaging the sailing accident that would end Shelley's life six years later in Italy, since despite his love of boats, he never learned to swim.

But the highlight of the trip, according to Byron's letters, remains one of Switzerland's most thrilling attractions: the Château de Chillon, a medieval fortress whose turrets rise dreamlike from the waters. The castle became notorious in the 16th century as a political prison, and the two poets were deeply moved when a gendarme showed them the dungeon, where an outspoken cleric, François Bonivard, had been chained to a pillar for six years.

FASCINATED as the Romantics were by the spiritual power of untrammelled nature, not even the self-absorbed Byron could visit Switzerland without experiencing the Alps. At different times over the summer, he and his cohort made grueling excursions by horse and mule, to be totally overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the peaks and waterfalls, the rumbling avalanches and the unearthly glaciers — "like a frozen-hurricane," Byron wrote admiringly in his journal.

In the age before contraception, "free love" worked better for men than for women. The Diodati idyll went awry in August, when Claire revealed that she was pregnant. "Is the brat mine?" Byron wondered gallantly in one letter, before reluctantly concluding that it must be. The Shelleys departed for England on Aug. 29, with Byron promising to support the child. He lingered on at the Villa Diodati until the beginning of October, but finally left Switzerland for Italy, to throw himself deeper into sensual abandon.

In retrospect, the "Frankenstein summer" seems a fantastical interlude of happiness in lives marked by tragedy. In 1822, Percy Shelley drowned in Italy, at age 29; Dr Polidori had committed suicide the year before, at age 25. Claire's daughter with Byron died at age 5, and only one of Mary Shelley's four children with Percy survived. Byron died in Greece in 1824, at the ripe old age of 36.

The last survivor was the audacious Claire Clairmont, who lived to age 80. At the end of her life, she started a bitter memoir denouncing the practice of “free love,” which, she says, turned Byron and Shelley, “the two finest poets of England” into “monsters of lying, meanness, cruelty and treachery.” (The scrawled pages were discovered in 2009 by the biographer Daisy Hay in the New York Public Library, where the extensive Pforzheimer Collection of Shelley and His Circle contains a marvelous array of manuscripts).

Today, such morbid ruminations are hard to sustain in the brilliant summer light reflecting from Lake Geneva. On my last night in Montreux, I headed down to the jazz festival and drank as many thimblefuls of wine as I could afford. *Carpe diem* — Byron and the Shelleys surely would have concurred — for how many summers do we have?