

George iv: the prince
regent (1811-1820).



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When George IV died, on 26th June, 1830, The Times (founded in 1775) published a scathing obituary saying, as Hibbert (1975) quotes: ' There never was an individual less regretted by his fellow-creatures than this deceased king'. This was not an idiosyncratic view, for both as Prince Regent and later as King, George had been roundly criticised. Although he encouraged the idea that he was ' the first gentleman of Europe' and was doubtless a ' patron of the Arts'- notwithstanding the somewhat mercurial and superficial nature of this ' patronage', in some cases - his faults far outweighed his virtues and from his own family to the general populace he was the object of scorn and derision throughout his life. This is widely reflected in the Art and Literature of the era, where George sat as uneasily as Humpty Dumpty atop a mountain of creativity: not so much its head but its target.

Prince George Augustus Frederick reigned as Regent from 1811 until the death of his father, George III, in 1820, when he ascended the throne. George III had bouts of perceived ' madness' (now generally thought to have been due to porphyria, which ironically his son inherited) and more than once his ability to rule was called into question by the parliaments of the time. When it was finally realised that he was unable to function sufficiently even to open Parliament, the nine year Regency began.

A time of huge political change, encompassing riots, revolution and the abolition of slavery, and against the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars, the years of the ' Regency' have come to be associated with an artistic renaissance in which architects such as Nash, encouraged by the Prince, would redesign London; artists like Reynolds and Gainsborough would

significantly develop portraiture and the powerfully influential ' Romantic Movement' in Literature, which encompassed the work of poets as diverse as Blake, Byron and Wordsworth, began. Crucially, it was also the time when the novel became widely recognised as an important genre, with the writing of such perennially popular novelists as Sir Walter Scott and Jane Austen.

Indeed, it is interesting to consider how Austen, not usually regarded as a ' controversial' writer, reflected the contemporary view of the Prince Regent. Austen's novel, *Emma*, was first published in 1815, and ' given a lavish supply of three Royal Highnesses' in its dedication (Tomalin, 1998). However, Austen was not in favour of this effusive wording, since she disliked the Prince Regent intensely, principally because of his treatment of his wife. In a letter to Martha Lloyd, dated February 16th, 1813, (cited in Le Faye, 1997) she wrote: Poor woman, I shall support her as long as I can, because she is a Woman, & because I hate her Husband - but I can hardly forgive her for calling herself ' attached & affectionate' to a Man whom she must detest - & the intimacy said to subsist between her & Lady Oxford is bad - I do not know what to do about it; but if I must give up the Princess, I am resolved at least always to think that she would have been respectable, if the Prince had behaved only tolerably by her at first.

Given that this was Austen's profoundly held, if ' private', opinion of ' His Royal Highness' it can only have been a source of great distress to her to accept the ' invitation', otherwise ' command', of the Prince, as an admirer of her work, to offer any dedication at all. Austen really had no choice but to agree, as was explained by his intermediary and librarian, John Murray. Her acquiescence is indicative of the Regent's power; his failure to acknowledge

the work personally, when published and sent to him as a gift, evidence of his rather superficial, vain nature, especially since he offered the suggestion that she write an 'historical romance' based on his family!

Yet, more importantly, perhaps, this telling vignette reveals much of the general opinion of the public, if we take Austen as representative of such. Clearly, the Princess is not thought guiltless, yet she is held less culpable than the Prince: 'she would have been respectable', writes Austen, surely an indictment against Regency Society in general. Certainly, she had parodied the excesses of the Regency mores in *Mansfield Park* (1814), where the Crawfords have been literally corrupted at the home of their uncle, 'the Admiral'. Austen simultaneously criticises the practices of Regency Society and the Prince Regent, since he is 'the First Gentleman' and director of this. Being privy to her naval officer brothers' stories, she is able to show just how indelicate 'polite society' has become, when Mary Crawford makes use of a rather risqué double-entendre when dining with the Bertram's. Her reference to having seen more of 'admirals and rears and vices' is shocking to both the meekly pious heroine, Fanny Price, and Fanny's cousin, the future clergyman, Edmund Bertram. Austen also shows the difference between city and rural life when Edmund criticises Mary's abrupt dismissal of the influence of the clergy by saying that, 'We do not look in great cities for our best morality'. The Court, at the centre of 'City life', with the Prince Regent at its head is thus neatly - and obliquely - criticised. The fact that the Prince was an 'admirer' of Austen's work, notwithstanding, displays her subtlety and his obtuseness. It also shows how wrong it is to think of Austen as uninterested in the 'important events' of her time. She is more than aware of the social

evils of the Regency period and in no small measure lays the blame for this at the feet of the 'immoral' Regent himself.

Criticism of the Prince is of necessity frequently subliminal, though he was often criticised openly, especially in the contemporary caricatures of such as George Cruikshank and James Gillray. These anti-establishment artists contrast strongly with the 'official view' evidenced in the commissioned portraits of the Prince Regent, and later the King, in the work of portraitists like Sir Thomas Lawrence. Peter Ackroyd, in his *London: The Biography* (2000) records George being referred to at his coronation as being 'obliged to present himself, as chief actor in a pantomime'. Since the coronation cost a small fortune, the Regent's 'play-acting' may be seen as akin to Marie-Antoinette's - and almost as dangerous. After all, this was uncomfortably close, chronologically, to the French Revolution, of 1789 and the earlier 'defection' of the Americas, in 1776. Indeed, there was a genuine fear of revolution in England at this time, especially after the assassination of the Prime Minister, Spencer Perceval, in 1812, who the Prince had, surprisingly given his previous difficulties with him, confirmed in office.

Events such as the Luddite Riots (the backdrop to Charlotte Brontë's novel of 1849, *Shirley*) proclaim the unrest which the disparity between the rich and the poor, nowhere more clearly displayed than in the extravagances of the Prince of Wales, was beginning to provoke. The introduction of the Corn Laws, in 1815, made wheat too expensive for the ordinary people whilst increasing the wealth of the nobility via their land and they were simultaneously increasing their workers' rents whilst decreasing their wages. As a result, riots erupted throughout the country and led to the Peterloo

Massacre in Manchester where eleven people were killed and 400 wounded; an ostentatious heir to the throne was clearly the last thing that was wanted. The early Romantics, stressing emotion over reason, reflected this social unrest and the initial impetus for the writing of such as Blake, Wordsworth, Byron and Shelley was politically radical. Later, when the work of Wordsworth became so imbued in the 'Establishment' that he was, after Robert Southey, created Poet Laureate, he was severely criticised by his contemporaries and earlier, in the 'Dedication' to his unfinished epic poem, Don Juan (1819-1824) Byron, whose political leanings were towards social reform (he even wrote 'Song for the Luddites', in 1816) lampooned Robert Southey and, by extension, the Regent, referred to in the poem as 'Fum the Fourth, our royal bird': Bob Southey! You're a poet - Poet-laureate, And representative of all the race, Although't is true that you turn'd out a Tory at Last, - yours has lately been a common case; And now, my Epic Renegade! what are ye at? With all the Lakers, in and out of place? A nest of tuneful persons, to my eye Like "four and twenty Blackbirds in a pye".

Southey had mourned Robespierre as 'the benefactor of mankind' on his death (Storey, 1997) but had, like Wordsworth (and even the Regent himself, once a 'supporter' of the French Revolution) modified his views. Byron here castigates his erstwhile fellow reformer and puns on the word 'pye' to link it with the previous Laureate, Henry James Pye, in order to emphasise the satirizing of the principal role of the Poet Laureate i. e. to 'flatter' the ruler, in this case the Prince Regent. Moreover, in the nursery rhyme, the king and queen are diverted by money and pleasure, 'the counting-house' and the 'bread and honey', a clear link to the excesses of the Regency court. It is

worth noting that Byron's 'Dedication' was never published with the Cantos of Don Juan in his lifetime and that the original nursery rhyme is thought to satirise an earlier King's greed, immorality and excesses, Henry VIII, whom Byron would use to attack the Regent in his poem, 'Windsor Poetics'.

Byron is also scornfully derisive about 'the Lakers', obviously the 'Lake Poets', such as Southey and Wordsworth, who Byron saw as having, in modern-day parlance, 'sold-out' to the Tories, having been 'Renegades' in their youth. Byron thus reflects the need for change and the corrupting nature of the Regency court which diverted men from reform by the temptations of the gorgeous trappings of wealth with which the Regent surrounded himself (such as the indulgent 'Xanadu' of the Royal Pavilion at Brighton, largely the work of John Nash). Byron was not altogether wrong to criticise his former 'allies', for it is certainly true that Wordsworth, in line with the roots of the Romantic ideal crystallized by the 'spirit' of the French Revolution (i. e. to discard an outdated way of life and of thinking when it was illegal then even to speak or write of this) changed his 'radical' views 'radically'. In 'The Prelude' (begun in 1805) Wordsworth exclaimed, 'bliss was it in that dawn to be alive', echoing the feeling that this was the herald of a new spirit to be embraced: Yet in the regal sceptre, and the pomp Of orders and degrees, I nothing found Then, or had ever, even in crudest youth, That dazzled me, but rather what I mourned And ill could brook, beholding that the best Ruled not, and feeling that they ought to rule.

The idea clearly expressed is that 'the pomp/ Of orders and degrees' is empty, vainglorious and unfair. The poet sees the injustices of the world and that 'the best/Ruled not'; nothing could be more critical of the Regency

excesses of early Nineteenth Century England. It was, as Byron, Shelley et al believed, a 'U-turn' of epic proportions for Wordsworth, in later life, to 're-assess' his work and take an Establishment view, and the mockery of Southey in 'Epic Renegade' is thus largely justified, though Byron was not wholly free of hypocrisy himself, of course, nor was Southey alone in his 'defection' to an altered interpretation of the term 'Romantic', placing the emphasis far more on the harmony with nature which is nowadays usually associated with the movement.

Quite the opposite was true of the early Romantic, William Blake. Never 'in tune' with any 'movement' per se, Blake retained a bold, idiosyncratic, reforming and largely anarchistic line throughout his life. In his poem 'London', from Songs of Experience (1794) Blake openly criticises every level of authority, even the throne: I wander thro' each charter'd street, Near where the charter'd Thames does flow, And mark in every face I meet Marks of weakness, marks of woe. In every cry of every Man, In every Infant's cry of fear, In every voice, in every ban, The mind-forg'd manacles I hear. How the Chimney-sweeper's cry Every black'ning Church appalls; And the hapless Soldier's sigh Runs in blood down Palace walls. But most thro' midnight streets I hear How the youthful Harlot's curse Blasts the new born Infant's tear, And blights with plagues the Marriage hearse.

T. S. Eliot's famous remark that Blake's poetry has 'an honesty against which the whole world conspires because it is unpleasant' is clearly evidenced here. His view of London is characterised by being taken from the level of the ordinary man and woman. Like Dickens, later, he opted to be the 'voice' of the 'common man' not the 'mouthpiece' of the Establishment; his <https://assignbuster.com/george-iv-the-prince-regent-1811-1820/>

' sensibility' causes him to react to the ' blood' on the ' Palace walls' and though a ' great London visionary' (Ackroyd, 2000, p. 15) not blind to its faults. Blake's black ' streets' are ' charter'd', hence, governed, under rule, and therefore intended to be protected. The fact that they are not criticises the entire society from the throne down, encompassing the ' black'ning church' which seems oblivious to the social evils embodied in ' the Chimney-sweeper's cry' and ' the youthful Harlot's curse'. The ' double-standard' of this corruptly led society is loathed by the poet and he does not shrink from proclaiming his abhorrence. Moreover, in the ' mind-forg'd manacles' he sees the hand of the monarch (especially since he first wrote ' German forged links'). The poet exemplifies the reforming zeal which informed early-Romanticism.

Blake was a consummate uncompromising artist, whose written work was always accompanied by a painstakingly created engraving on bronze, colour washed, then printed. However, his art was as different from his contemporaries' as his writing. The Regency saw the development of detailed Landscapes expressing profound emotional depth. This was very much encouraged by the Prince Regent, who developed his own collection and urged the government to do likewise, inspiring the later foundation of ' The National Gallery'. Samuel Palmer's simplicity of style combines with the visionary religious feeling derived from Blake; John Constable's peacefully, idyllic rural landscapes, innovatively created in the open air, evoked an England already felt to be slipping away and to be the more so with the coming of the Industrial Revolution.

Indeed, much Victorian Literature, written in the mid-nineteenth century, is set in the time of the Regency. For example, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, published in 1847, begins in 1801, with ' flashbacks' in the dual narrative to the late eighteenth century and Lockwood, the ' intruder' from London, and portrayed as a snobbish ' dandy', represents the Regency idea that ' the City' was ' the centre of the Universe'. (Interestingly, the Brontë sisters almost certainly took their models for the ' wild, untamed' heroes of their novels from the writing of this era, too, being ' Byronic' in nature; they were also influenced by their admiration of the Duke of Wellington, a critic of the Prince Regent.) This was quite widespread in the mid nineteenth century, to be found in the works of George Eliot and Thomas Hardy amongst others.

Turner's wild and deliberately indistinct ' seascapes' influenced later authors as well as artists and the Regent's sensitivity to the importance of Art is evidenced in his patronage of it throughout his life. Like Kenneth Grahame's ' Toad', he often became obsessed with fads only to drop them without further thought but it is a testimony to its importance to him that this was not the case with Art, to which he remained devoted in his support and appreciation despite the many deprecating caricatures which satirised his life and reign, calling him, in later life, ' the Prince of Whales' (Le Faye, p. 44) due to his corpulent build; Keats even referred to him as ' fat George'(Gittings, 1970). Indeed, to some extent, he lampooned himself more successfully, albeit unwittingly, by commissioning ridiculously flattering ' official' portraits by such as Sir Thomas Lawrence (1816).

' Prinny', as he was known by his inner circle, was equally interested in architecture, commissioning John Nash to renovate Windsor Castle and

Buckingham Palace, as well as to reshape London. In the course of this, the eponymous Regent's Park was developed, initially for private use only, from the former Royal Hunting Grounds (Ackroyd, 2000); this, however, was unlikely to endear him to the starving populace of whom he seemed largely oblivious. Even his brother, William IV, later remarked that the Prince Regent had, 'damned expensive tastes' in 'knicknackery' (Brown & Cunliffe, 1982, p. 148) but given his uneasy relationship with his family, it was inevitable that any aspect of his life that could be criticised, would be, especially since acknowledgement of George's defects could only add to the popularity of his successors; the moral and sober replacing the immoral and facile. (This would culminate in the extravagantly 'wholesome and respectable', Queen Victoria, who is recorded as having disliked being near 'Uncle King', as she called George IV, saying it was: 'too disgusting because his face was covered with greasepaint'.)

Nowhere was this more evident than in the Prince's private life, which both as Regent and King, was always 'very vulnerable'; so much so that most of his correspondence was destroyed on his death (Aspinall, 1963). His 'first love', Mary Robinson, an actress whose stage name was 'Perdita', received passionate love letters from him in his youth signed 'Florizel' (probably a reference to Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* where characters so named fall in love: Florizel is a prince, Perdita a royal brought up by a shepherd). Cannily, given the Prince's relative penury in later life, she extracted a financial 'bond' from him to be redeemed on his coming of age; surprisingly, the Regent honoured this but then, he was usually generous to his mistresses rather than his wives.

Maria Fitzherbert, a twice-widowed Roman Catholic and the love of his life was much less successful financially. Indeed, the Prince frequently borrowed from her and hid from his creditors at her house. Her religion forbade their marriage, but George married her in secret, in 1785, without the consent of the King, thus rendering the union illegal. Nevertheless, he remained close to her to the end of his life and after his death, Wellington, not an admirer of the Prince but keen to preserve the dignity of the monarchy, made it his personal task as executor to burn his correspondence with Mrs. Fitzherbert. This was an exercise in retroactive 'damage-limitation', because much of the criticism of George had surrounded his 'marriages' and liaisons. His indiscretions made it even easier for the popular press to lampoon him and continue to hold him in very low-esteem, although much of what he achieved was conveniently overlooked or regarded as 'frivolous'. The Times wrote of him that he preferred 'a girl and a bottle to politics and a sermon' but overlooked the fact that he had this, at least, in common, with most of his contemporaries.

George had been compelled by the King, for financial reasons, to marry his cousin, Caroline of Brunswick, in 1795. Caroline, it appears, was popular with everyone but the Prince despite her indiscretions, for which many, like Jane Austen, blamed George (when the Prince first saw Caroline, he supposedly called frantically for brandy). They were separated immediately after the birth of their daughter and George banned her from his elaborate coronation. Caroline, not easily deterred, attempted to force her way in but was repelled by the boxers George had hired as pages (Brown & Cunliffe, p. 234). Nevertheless, she remained very popular with the general public.

George was apparently incapable of achieving similar 'popularity'; indeed, he appears to remain largely indifferent to it, even though his coach was physically attacked in 1817. Instead of reacting positively to the unrest, he chose instead to 'set styles', taking up Regency 'dandies' like 'Beau' Brummell and using them as his 'model' then dropping them in response to trivial quarrels. (Brummell famously retaliated by responding to a royal snub with the question: 'Who's your fat friend?' but paid for it.) George abandoned the use of wig powder when it was taxed, is largely credited with having spread (on Brummell's advice) the adoption of the dark simplicity in male attire which replaced the more elaborate and colourful silks and satins of earlier times and he inspired the wearing of 'tartan'. However, in a time of revolution, war and social upheaval, with his people starving, it is, perhaps, easy to see how 'accomplished tastes' could not be accepted as any kind of serious substitute for strong, moral leadership. Therefore, although much of the criticism of the Regent's appearance was itself superficial, behind it lay a deep disquiet about the future monarch which was in no way dispelled when it became a reality.

Byron wrote, in 'Windsor Poetics', of seeing the Regent standing between the coffins of Henry VIII and Charles I, in the royal vault at Windsor (Byron, Poetical Works, p. 73): Famed for contemptuous breach of sacred ties, By headless Charles see heartless Henry lies; Between them stands another sceptred thing - It moves, it reigns - in all but name, a king: Charles to his people, Henry to his wife, - In him the double tyrant starts to life: Justice and death have mix'd their dust in vain, Each royal vampire wakes to life again,

Ah, what can tombs avail! - since these disgorge The blood and dust of both -
to mould a George.

Byron traces an unhappy lineage to its present 'sceptred thing': a combination of the arrogance of Charles I, ruling, he thought, by 'Divine Right', and the corrupt, immoral and headstrong, Henry VIII, who tore the country apart for his own vain fulfilment. These 'royal vampires', feeding in the style of contemporary Gothic horror from the 'blood' of their people, find a hideous reincarnation in the Regent, 'the double tyrant', George. Byron does not paint a pretty picture but seems, overall, to reflect a common belief. As *The Times* printed on his death: What eye has wept for him? What heart has heaved one throb of unmercenary sorrow? ... If he ever had a friend - a devoted friend in any rank of life - we protest that the name of him or her never reached us.

The birth of the future King George IV, initially announced as that of a girl to his disappointed parents, culminated in a more widespread disappointment. Wellington, George's polar opposite in most things, called him 'the worst man I ever fell in with in my whole life' but later referred to him more appropriately, perhaps, as a 'medley' of a man. Certainly, both as Regent and King, George presided over a period whose influence is still much in evidence but little of this was due to its ruler.