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# Byron and politics: 'born for opposition'

A collaborative exhibition at King's College London

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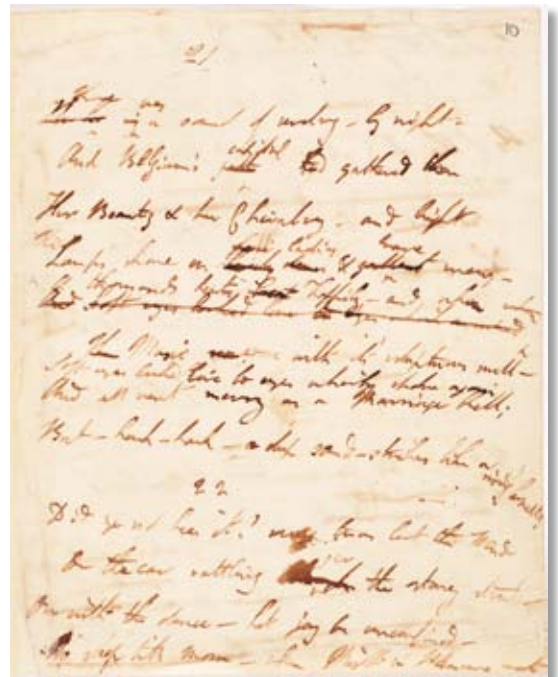


Fig. 1 Manuscript of Byron's *Childe Harold's pilgrimage*, Canto III, stanzas 21-22. NLS Ms.43325, f.10r. Reproduced by permission of the National Library of Scotland

Regimental cap badges and a fragment of shot acquired as souvenirs from the battlefield of Waterloo during a visit of 1816; the manuscript and first printed edition of *Childe Harold's pilgrimage*, Canto III; letters from Lord Byron to his friend John Cam Hobhouse and his publisher John Murray II; an early manuscript draft of Byron's parliamentary speech on Roman Catholic emancipation; and the poet's deadly swordstick, a personal effect which recalls both his lameness

and his role as a man of action in the cause of freedom – these are just some of the 53 items that went to form the library’s summer exhibition at King’s College London: *Byron and politics: ‘born for opposition’*, which ran from 24 June to 25 September 2013.

Jointly mounted by the John Murray Archive of the National Library of Scotland and the Foyle Special Collections Library of King’s College London, the exhibition brought together original literary and political manuscripts, private letters, printed editions and personal possessions of George Gordon Noel, Lord Byron (1788–1824), many of them never exhibited in public before. It was conceived to coincide with the 39th International Byron Conference, held at King’s from 1 to 6 July 2013, and to reflect the theme of that conference in exploring the poet’s involvement in politics in Britain, Italy and Greece and his fascination with the triumphs and failures of his fallen hero, Napoleon Bonaparte. A truly collaborative project, the exhibition was curated by staff from the National Library of Scotland (David McClay), the Foyle Special Collections Library (Stephanie Breen and Katie Sambrook) and the academic departments of English and Hellenic Studies at King’s (Christine Kenyon Jones and Roderick Beaton, respectively). Exhibits came from the collections of both institutions, as well as from five different private collections. Two years of hard work went into the planning, installation and promotion of the exhibition, and in this article we outline some of the steps involved.

#### PLANNING CONTENT AND CASE LAYOUT

The exhibition was held in the Weston Room of the Maughan Library, King’s College London, which contains nine exhibition cases running along its length. We considered the size and arrangement of our exhibition cases when developing content and layout ideas. At an early stage in our planning David McClay compiled a list of approximately fifty potential exhibits drawn from the John Murray Archive. We then drew on subject strengths from our own collections to propose material that would complement the National Library of Scotland selection and any private loans we had in mind. For example, our holdings at King’s are rich in material on 19th-century Greece and the Greek War of Independence. We also looked for material with pictorial content to add colour and contrast.



*‘Ruins of Hadrian’s Temple, with a view of the south-east angle of the Acropolis and Parthenon.’ In John Cam Hobhouse, A Journey through Albania, and other provinces of Turkey in Europe and Asia, to Constantinople, during the years 1809 and 1810. London: James Cawthorn, 1813. Vol. 1, plate facing page 322. King’s College London, Foyle Special Collections Library: Rare Books Collection DR425 HOB*

We structured the exhibition thematically, setting aside the first case for an overall introduction and devoting two cases each to the following four themes: *Britannia: Parliament, party & the Prince*; *Napoleon: Emperor, expectation & exile*; *Italy: politics, patriotism & plays*; and *Greece: Hellenism & heroism*.

As our list of contents evolved and expanded, our next step was to determine how many items would physically fit into our nine exhibition cases and to narrow down the selection accordingly. Items from the John Murray Archive formed the majority of the exhibits and we faced the challenging task of working out the final content and layout without having seen the majority of exhibits. To aid this process the National Library of Scotland supplied dimensions for its items, noting volumes to be shown open. We created a template of an exhibition case and used blank sheets of paper to create mock-ups of the external loans, carefully cut to actual size. This enabled us to visualise the space available in each case and to move items between cases or suggest leaving items out. To maximise our use of space we decided to include only short captions in the cases and to supply longer descriptions in a published catalogue. Digital photographs of our mocked-up case layouts proved a useful reference tool when finalising our content selection and when installing the exhibition.

#### BUDGETS AND LOANS

Like any other sizeable project, an exhibition is not put together for nothing, though some of the costs can be absorbed by a combination of good

will and external funding. At an early stage in our planning we listed all the likely areas of expenditure and set provisional costs against them. Our list contained the following elements:

- conservation treatment to any items for which this was a necessary prerequisite to their display
- any modifications to the exhibition room that might be requested by lenders
- mounts and other supports for individual items
- printing and mounting of facsimiles (e.g. where we wished to show more than one opening from a bound volume)
- professional photography (required in the valuation of private loans)
- valuation fees for private loans
- any additional insurance premiums required
- lenders' courier expenses (travel, accommodation and subsistence for both outward and return trips)
- catalogue design and production costs
- promotional costs (posters and flyers; postage; catering and stewarding for launch event and other associated group visits and receptions)

While some of these areas did involve actual expenditure, others were handled in such a way as to minimise or avoid financial outlay; item selection was made so as to avoid any unduly fragile material and the valuer we approached to value the private loans generously waived his fees. We were also fortunate to secure financial support from a number of organisations and individuals, enabling us to fund the design and printing of the exhibition catalogue entirely by external grants and donations.<sup>1</sup>

As material from the National Library of Scotland's John Murray Archive formed the majority of the exhibits, it was essential to submit the formal loan request well in advance of the exhibition installation date. Many institutions will not consider loan requests submitted less than six months before an exhibition is due to go up, and we were able comfortably to meet this timescale, not least due to David McClay's prompt and skilful selection of items to be lent. A loan request is quite a bulky portfolio of documents to assemble, usually comprising the following:

- a list of items requested, with call numbers and preferred openings

- details of the exhibition (title, running dates and brief summary of scope, purpose and intended audience)
- exhibition facilities report, following the template devised by the UK Registrars Group<sup>2</sup>
- plans and photograph of the requesting library's building and exhibition room
- supplementary display case report, following the template devised by the UK Registrars Group<sup>3</sup>
- copy of the requesting library's disaster management plan
- confirmation of 'nail-to-nail' insurance cover for all loaned items for the duration of the loan, in accordance with their monetary value

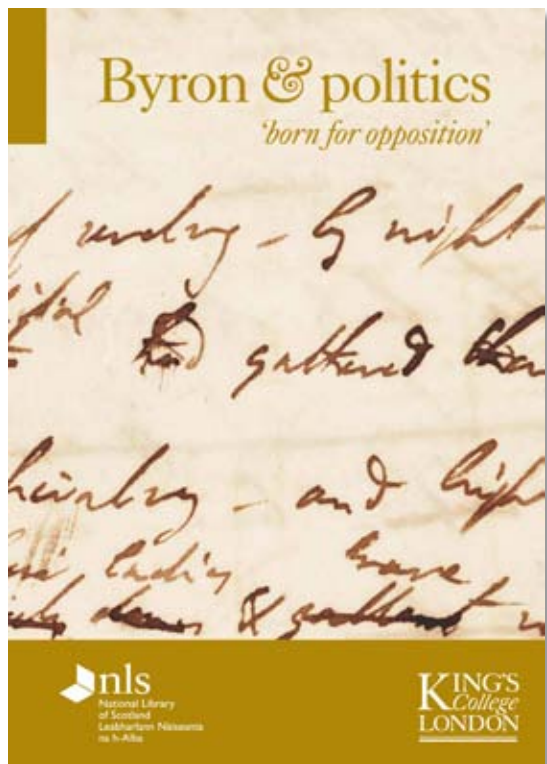
In addition, some lenders may have their own particular requirements; private lenders, for example, may wish for complete anonymity even in the securing of valuations (hence the need to commission photographs of an item from which a valuer can work without viewing the original).

#### **EXHIBITION CATALOGUE**

To accompany the exhibition we published a 40-page full-colour illustrated catalogue designed by Susen Vural Design.<sup>4</sup> We contacted the designers eight months before the exhibition opening date to request an estimate of design and proofing costs. At our first meeting we discussed general design matters including length, size, paper stock, column format, illustrations (full-page and double-page spreads) and layout. Following our meeting the designers presented some sample concepts and mapped out a schedule of key dates. This schedule included an agreed date to supply final text, high-resolution images and logos (with any usage guidelines) to the designers, dates for the supply and return of proofs and a deadline for sending the artwork to print. We used the King's print management system to request print quotations from a list of approved printers.

Over the course of the next two months we turned our attention to writing the catalogue text. To simplify our final editing process we devised some general style conventions for headings, quotes and citations and followed the King's house style. David McClay wrote a considerable amount of the catalogue text, describing the exhibits from the John Murray Archive, while other curators contributed text for the remaining exhibits. We found it helpful to factor in a generous amount of time for proof-reading the PDF proofs supplied by the designer and for checking the final printer's

proofs. We also found it effective for one curator to act as a single point of contact with the designers. The final printed catalogue was delivered on schedule, three weeks ahead of the exhibition opening.



Front cover of the exhibition catalogue

This was the first time we had published a catalogue to accompany a library exhibition and we found the experience rewarding. Visitors could refer to the catalogue while browsing the exhibition and take their copy home as a souvenir. We were also delighted to present copies of the catalogue to those who had lent their generous help and support in the preparation of the exhibition.

#### INSTALLATION

The National Library of Scotland created supports and mounts for all the exhibits, which lent a uniform appearance to the display. Lecterns at 20° angles were created for single-sheet items and v-shaped cradles for volumes. Brief captions for the exhibits were designed, printed and mounted in-house at the Foyle Special Collections Library.

We divided installation activities over the course of two days. On the first day the National Library of Scotland transported exhibits to the Maughan Library. Exhibits were unwrapped and placed on mounts and positioned in the cases by National Library of Scotland conservator Gordon Yeoman

alongside the King's material. Loan and condition reports were agreed and signed.

We scheduled the arrival of private loans during the course of the morning of the second day, staggering their arrival to allow time to place the items in the cases and to sign loan and condition reports. Lux levels, temperature and humidity levels were checked by Gordon Yeoman and temperature and humidity monitors were placed discreetly in select cases for the duration of the exhibition.



Fig. 4 The first display case of the exhibition

#### PROMOTING THE EXHIBITION

Once the exhibition was installed the focus of our energies naturally shifted to its effective promotion. A formal opening by the present Lord Byron on the first day of the 2013 International Byron Conference whetted the appetites of the 120 or so conference delegates and furnished our press office with the ingredients of a compelling story for a press release. At the same time we in the library made sure that posters and flyers were circulated to libraries, museums and other cultural venues across the UK and that web pages, professional and scholarly email lists and Twitter feeds were supplied with text and images publicising the exhibition. Visits for summer school students and private views for those who had supported the exhibition were organised, but the vast majority of exhibition visitors were individuals, including over 1,000 who thronged to the building on Open House London weekend (21–22 September 2013), when many of London's historic buildings, including our library, open their doors to the public. We do not charge for access to our exhibitions but we do operate a simple self-service ticketing procedure, which enables us to gain valuable data about our exhibition visitors and the effectiveness of different means of publicity. All visitors complete a paper ticket with their

name and address and hand this to library security staff, who at the end of each week forward all tickets received to the Special Collections team. The ticket contains an optional question, 'How did you learn about the exhibition?' which most visitors are happy to answer.

An analysis of all tickets received over the course of the exhibition revealed the following data:

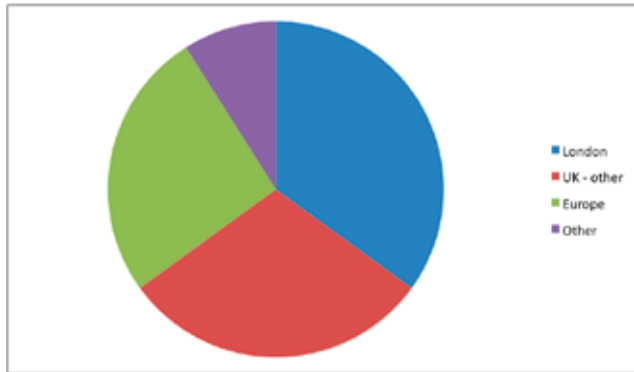


Fig. 5 Breakdown of visitors by home address

Our central London location and the timing of the exhibition for the height of the tourist season no doubt partly accounts for the high proportion of non-local visitors, but this is probably also due to Byron's enduring European fame as a champion of freedom; certainly, the comments left by many French, Italian and Spanish visitors to the exhibition, recording their admiration for Byron, testify to his high reputation in these countries.

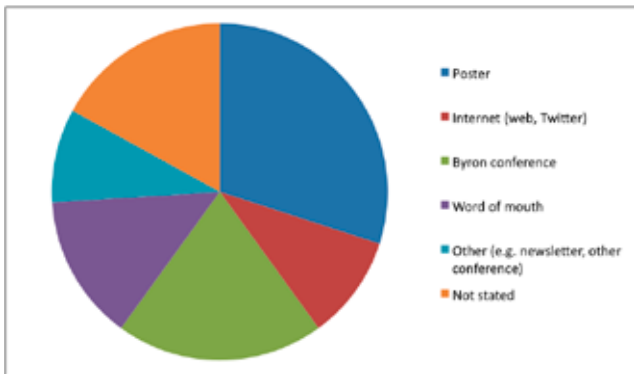


Fig. 6 Breakdown of visitors by method of learning about exhibition

We were interested and pleased to see that the simplest way of publicising the exhibition – attaching a laminated colour poster to the library gates – proved to be the most effective. Our library is an imposing Victorian building located in a busy central London street; a poster advertising an exhibition invites the passer-by to come in and enjoy the building's architecture and history, as well as the items on show in the display cases,

and once regular passers-by have attended one exhibition, they are more likely to visit future ones (we hold three library exhibitions each year).

## CONCLUSION

The time, effort and resources involved in planning, mounting and publicising a collaborative exhibition on this scale should not be underestimated, but nor should the benefits. By collaborating, King's College London and the National Library of Scotland formed a partnership that was mutually beneficial and laid the basis for future collaborative projects; the National Library of Scotland was able to showcase its collections at a central London venue, while King's was delighted to act as temporary home to a matchless selection of Byron manuscripts. The printed catalogue and the exhibition's online version<sup>5</sup> will, we hope, act not only as lasting records of the display but also as aids to future Byron scholarship. But perhaps the most important measure of the exhibition's success was the evident pleasure it gave to visitors, as these sample comments, taken from the visitors' book, underline:

*'Great actually to witness at first hand the genius's handwriting and possessions. Thanks!'*

*'So interesting and very moving to read so many manuscripts. I have been taken to his world!'*

*'So informative. Wonderful to see his actual writings and the catalogue will be a delight to read. Thank you.'*

## NOTES

- 1 Geoffrey C Bond OBE DL, Lord Byron, the International Byron Society, John and Virginia Murray, The John R Murray Charitable Trust and Eric Wishart
- 2 <http://www.ukregistrarsgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/UKRG-Facilities-report.pdf>
- 3 <http://www.ukregistrarsgroup.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/UKRG-Display-case-supplement.pdf>
- 4 <http://susenvural.com/>
- 5 <http://www.kingscollections.org/exhibitions/specialcollections/byron/>