

DONALD PRELL



*Lord Byron*  
*Coincidence or Destiny*

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DONALD B. PRELL



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Cover: English Merchant Brig heeling to the wind  
Attributed to Robert Salmon (1775-1844)  
(The vessel is about the same size as the *Hercules*)

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# LORD BYRON

## COINCIDENCE or DESTINY



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Research can sometimes unearth a chance occurrence --- an odd coincidence. Whilst researching the vessel that took Lord Byron from Italy to Greece in 1823, I deemed this happened, for I discovered that two parallel Byronic universes were linked in 1815, and then converged in 1823. One is tempted to call it destiny. If Byron had known the full account, he might have agreed.

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The story begins:

Quoting from the *Recollections* of John Hobhouse:

On December 24 [1814] Lord Byron left London for Seaham, accompanied by Mr. Hobhouse. The ground was covered with snow when they arrived at Newark, and the frost was so biting that the servants could with difficulty support themselves on the box of the carriage. Lord Byron frankly confessed to his companion that he was not in love with his intended bride; but at the same time he said that he felt for her that regard which

he believed was the surest guarantee of continued affection and matrimonial felicity. He owned that he had felt considerable repugnance in marrying before his pecuniary affairs were arranged, so as to insure a sufficient income to his wife and himself immediately upon their marriage; and he had been so far influenced by this feeling as to make an offer of waiting a year or two (considering himself in the interval as an *engaged* man) before the marriage should take place. There was no delusion employed by Lord Byron - he never hid his poverty - he never concealed his sentiments or altered his way of talking in the presence of Miss Milbanke, he was not precipitate or even eager in hastening the match - and, certainly, gave his wife's family and the lady herself every opportunity of delaying, if not of breaking off, the connection.

At eight o'clock in the evening [December 30] we arrived at Seaham [Hall], Sir Ralph Milbanke's. Miss Milbanke is rather dowdy-looking, and wears a long and high dress (as Byron had observed), though she has excellent feet and ankles. Of my friend she seemed dotingly fond, gazing with delight on his bold and animated face, this regulated, however, with the most entire decorum. Byron appears to love her personally, when in her company.<sup>1</sup>

Seaham is in Durham County on England's east coast. At 11 am, two days after arriving at the residence of his father-in-law-to-be, Byron and Anne Isabella (Annabella)

Milbanke were married by the Reverend Thomas Noel in Seaham Hall's drawing room.

Miss Milbanke was as firm as a rock, and, during the whole ceremony, looked steadily at Byron. She repeated the words audibly and well. Byron hitched at first when he said, "I, George Gordon," and when he came to the words, "With all my worldly goods I thee endow," looked at me with a half-smile.

She came in her travelling-dress soon after the ceremony and sat quietly in the drawing room. Byron was calm and as usual. I felt as if I had buried a friend.

At a little before twelve I handed Lady Byron downstairs and into her carriage. Of my dearest friend I took a melancholy leave. He was unwilling to leave my hand, and I had hold of his out of the window when the carriage drove off.<sup>2</sup>

The same time as Byron's carriage was passing through the gates of Seaham Hall, something was happening a short six miles north, in or near the shipbuilding town of Sunderland. Although wood and skilled labor were scarce, a result of the large amount of naval vessels that had been built during the Napoleonic wars (1803-1815), ships continued to be constructed not only for the British Navy, but also for the growing merchant fleet preparing to take the results of the Industrial Revolution to the four corners of the world.

The River Wear rising in the Penninines, flows eastwards, mostly through County Durham, until it enters

the North Sea at Sunderland. Early in 1815, at one of the many boatyards located on the river, a new brig, built by Dryden Trotter (block and mast maker), was about to be launched. Among Merchant Brigs, she was quite small. With a displacement of only 138 tons, her dimensions were: Length aloft 65.4'--- Extreme Breath 19.7' --- Depth of Hold 11.6'. Her owners, Dryden Trotter and William Wilson (a coal fitter of Bishopwearmouth) named her *Hercules*.<sup>3</sup>

Quoting Lady Milbank (Anabella's mother) in a letter to Sir James Burges:

The Byron's returned here [Seaham Hall] last Saturday [January 21]; they are both well, and as happy as youth and love can make them. He appears to prefer a quiet domestic circle to any other, and neither of them seems in any haste to visit London.<sup>4</sup>

The newlyweds stayed on at Seaham Hall until early in March when they departed for Six Mile Bottom to visit Byron's sister; then on to London and the beginning of the end of their marriage.

Meanwhile on the River Wear, the *Hercules* was being prepared for sea trials. Soon she would be sold to Peter Russell of Broad Street, Ratcliff, Middlesex, near the river Thames, London.

December 10, 1815, Ada, Byron's daughter was born -- then five weeks later he was notified of his wife's intention to separate. His friend Hobhouse wrote of leaving England:

Up at eight [April 25, 1816], breakfasted; all on board except the company. The Captain said he could not wait, and Byron could not get up a moment sooner. However, after some bustle out came Byron, and, taking my arm, walked down to the quay. By the way he said, as he had often done, "Do you think there will be any necessity for *publishing*? Perhaps we had better, at any rate, be ready for them." He got on board a little after nine: the bustle kept Byron in spirits, but he looked affected when the packet glided off. God bless him for a gallant spirit and a kind one. He sometimes talked of returning in a year or so, at others of being longer away, but told me he felt a presentiment that his absence would be long. Again God bless him.<sup>5</sup>

For the next six years Byron was *voyaging* on land, one vignette after another. Some of the players included: Claire Clairmont, Byron's second daughter (Alegra), J. W. Polidori, Thomas Moore, Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Thomas Medwin, Leigh Hunt, Daniel Roberts, Edward E. Williams, Edward John Trelawny, Countess Teresa Guiccioli, Count Pietro Gamba, Lord and Lady Blessington.

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On May 16, 1816, the *Brig Hercules'* Port of Registry was listed as London. John Scott was now her master, sailing his ship from the Ports of London and Bristol to various harbors in Canada.

Records of her voyages confirm that she sailed from London, June 15, 1817, to Halifax and St. John, New Brunswick, Canada. On April 25, 1821 she sailed from Bristol arriving in Montreal on June 26, delivering general cargo to Turner & Company. On July 3, 1821, Captain J. Scott brought the *Brig Hercules* to the Port of Montreal with a cargo of rum and coals. Early in 1823, the *Hercules* sailed from Bristol to Quebec and Montreal, Master J. Scott<sup>6</sup>

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In May of 1823, Byron was living near Genoa; his involvement with Countess Teresa Guiccioli was almost that of a marriage. It was now seven years since he had left England.

On May 26, 1823, Captain Daniel Roberts wrote to his friend Edward Trelawny:

Between you and me, I think, there is small chance of Byron's going to Greece; so I think from the wavering manner in which he speaks of it; he said the other day, "Well, Captain, if we do not go to Greece, I am determined to go somewhere, and hope we shall all be at sea together by next month, as I am tired of this place, the shore, and all the people on it."<sup>7</sup>

On June 5, 1823, Roberts again wrote to Trelawny:

Byron has sold the *Bolivar* to Lord Blessington for four hundred guineas, and is determined to go to Greece: he says, whilst he was in doubt, fearing it might prove a

reality, he did not like to bring you here; now, he wishes much to see you to have your opinion as to what steps it will be most necessary to take. I have been on board several vessels with him; as yet he has not decided on any of them. I think he would find it answer, now he has sold the schooner, to buy the three-masted clipper *we* saw at Leghorn. I have written by his desire to Dunn about her; if you come here by way of Leghorn, pray overhaul her, and then you will be able to give him your opinion. He has asked me to be of the party.<sup>8</sup>

After seven years of plying the waters from England to Canada, Captain Scott suddenly decided to take the *Hercules* to the Mediterranean, arriving in the port of Genoa about the same time as Byron was planning to leave for Greece.

Once Byron had made the decision to sail to Greece he instructed his banker Charles F. Barry, to join with Captain Roberts in locating and chartering a vessel for the voyage. There is no record as to how Barry and Roberts were introduced to Captain Scott, but by June 18, Barry wrote to Byron:

I have engaged our Northern friend for Two Hundred & Thirty Pounds. He promises to make a great many alterations & in fact to do everything you can wish to have done....<sup>9</sup>

Although the *Hercules* was already committed for a short trip to Leghorn, Captain Scott promised it would be

available as soon as it returned to Genoa, which occurred the end of June. Byron chartered the *Hercules* for a period of two months starting on July 1, 1823. The original copy of the Charter was not transcribed until September of 2008, when it was located in the George Gordon Byron Collection, part of the Manuscript Collection of the Harry Ransom Research Center (University of Texas at Austin), and then transcribed by the author.<sup>10</sup>

In 1815 Byron and the *Hercules* were parted by a mere six miles; eight years later (1823) they were united.

Count Pietro Gamba described the departure from Genoa:

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of July we were aboard: Captain Trelawny, the physician, eight domestics, and myself formed his suite. Lord Byron had likewise given passage to a Greek named Schilitzy, of Constantinople, coming from Russia. We had five horses aboard, arms and ammunition for our own use, two one-pounders, belonging to his schooner the Bolivar, which he left at Genoa. The uncertainty of the course he was about to pursue, and the information he had received from various quarters, induced him to carry his supplies in specie. He had ten thousand Spanish dollars, in ready money, and bills of exchange for forty thousand more. There were, likewise some chests of medicine sufficient for a thousand men for a year.<sup>11</sup>

A full complement of passengers and crew were waiting for wind to take them on their way to Leghorn, but there was only a dead calm. According to Count Gamba, "Byron went on shore with Barry, his banker, and Mr. Trelawny, to the Lomellina, one of the most beautiful villas in the environs of Genoa, about six miles from the city. Lord Byron dined with us there, under a tree, on cheese and fruit." They slept aboard the ship.

Gamba's account of July 15<sup>th</sup>:

We were able to clear the port about sunrise. We remained in sight of Genoa during the whole day. The weather was delightful, the sun scorching, and the wind light. We enjoyed the sight of the magnificent amphitheatre, which Genoa presents to the view at some distance from land. Towards midnight a strong westerly wind arose; we made head against it for three or four hours, but in the end the captain was obliged to steer back to the port of Genoa. The horses, unaccustomed to the sea, and badly accommodated, caused us serious inconvenience. They broke down their divisions, and kicked each other. We re-entered the port at six in the morning. Lord Byron passed nearly the whole night on deck. Those of his suite who were not affected with seasickness assisted him in his endeavours to prevent greater mischief amongst the horses. He did not feel himself unwell till towards morning, when we entered the port. I was half dead with sickness the whole night. When able to rise, he

said to me, "You have lost one of the most magnificent sights I ever beheld. For a short time we were in serious danger; but the captain and his crew did wonders. I was the whole time on deck. The sight is not new to me, but I have always looked upon a storm as one of the sublimest spectacles in nature." He appeared thoughtful, and remarked, that he considered a bad beginning a favourable omen.

The whole day was spent in repairing damages. His Lordship wishing to visit his palace at Albaro, which he had left in the care of his banker, I accompanied him. His conversation was somewhat melancholy on our way to Albaro; he spoke much of his past life, and of the uncertainty of the future. "Where," said he, "shall we be in a year?" It looked like a melancholy foreboding; for on the same day of the same month, in the next year, he was carried to the tomb of his ancestors.<sup>12</sup>

Averaging only twenty miles per day it took five days to reach Leghorn, on the afternoon of July 21<sup>st</sup>. Then two more days to complete taking stores on board, which included ample feed for the five horses for the anticipated ten to fifteen days of sailing.

Two additional passengers now boarded the ship. Captain George Vitali, who had been granted passage to Greece by Byron and a Scotsman, James Hamilton Browne, a man with strong Hellenic sympathies who had asked to join Byron's entourage. Browne was knowledgeable about the

Ionian Islands, and it was on his recommendation that Byron decided to sail to Cephalonia instead of Zante.

On July 24, 1823, the *Hercules* sailed from Leghorn; a rough sailing overcrowded, bad smelling vessel. Overcrowded because on this small 65-foot-long boat, Byron had decided, not only to take his retinue of eight, but also six passengers, five horses and two dogs. Taking into account that a square-rigged brig requires a crew of at least 8 to 10, a vessel twice the size of the *Hercules* would have been tightly packed.

So, in addition to Captain Scott, his First Mate and his crew, those boarding the *Hercules* included:<sup>13</sup>

- Lord Byron
- Count Pietro Gamba
- Edward John Trelawny
- Dr. Francesco Bruno (a recently graduated physician)
- Prince Constantine Skilitzy (Schilitzy, Schilizzi)
- Captain George Vitali
- James Hamilton Browne
- Benjamin Lewis (Trelawny's American Negro groom)
- William Fletcher (Byron's valet)
- Lega Zambelli (a defrocked priest who was Byron's  
Maestro di Casa)
- Giovanni Baltista "Tita" Falcieri (Byron's gondolier)
- Vincenzo Papi (Byron's coachman)
- 3 to 4 other unnamed servants
- Byron's Bulldog Moretto
- Byron's Newfoundland Lyon
- Trelawny's Hungarian cavalry horse
- Byron's four horses (one of which was Lady Blessington's  
Mameluke)

A line drawing of a brig, about the same size as the *Hercules*, fully loaded as the vessel would have been, is depicted in Appendix 3.

On August 3<sup>rd</sup> 1823, the *Brig Hercules* arrived in Cephalonia. Chartered to carry Byron to the "Greek Islands," she had accomplished her mission; Byron had been delivered safely to Greece.

Dr. James Kennedy described an incident, which occurred shortly after the *Hercules* arrived in Greece:

When he [Byron] first arrived at Cephalonia, the Captain of his ship anchored just before the military hospital. When Lord B. saw it, he complained of it laughingly to Captain Scott, as a thing of bad omen. "But," said his lordship, when he told the story, "the Captain, in order to remedy the evil, made it still worse; for next morning when we awoke, we found he had moored us on the opposite side, it is true, but it was just against the burying ground." He was accustomed to spend a good deal of time in joking with the Captain, who was a sort of humorist himself. "Scott," said Lord B., "when these fellows of yours take me over to Greece, are you not afraid that they will be inspired with a love of liberty, desert you, and join the glorious cause of the Greeks?" "I am not at all afraid of that," said the Captain; "I have taken care that they shall not do that." "Why, what have you done?" "I have done to them as your lordship does to me." "What is that?" "I have kept them three months in arrears."

Lord Byron laughed heartily at the Captain's joke.<sup>14</sup>

The *Hercules*, skippered by Captain Scott, sailed for England on September 12, 1823.

On October 6, 1823 Byron wrote to his friend from Metaxata, Cephalonia:

My dear Hobhouse --- I write a few lines by a private conveyance to inform you that I have sent you two packets --- whence you will extract information for the Committee --- one by Captain Scott of the Brig Hercules --- and the other by Mr. Peacock agent for a society on his return from his mission to the G[reek] G[overnment].

yrs, ever

N.B.<sup>15</sup>

From written accounts of the voyage, Byron felt at home on the *Hercules*. Did he learn any of the history of the ship; the coincidence of where and when she was built? Surely, if it had been discussed, wouldn't that have been included in one or more of the written accounts of the voyage? Did Captain Scott explain to Byron what made him decide to sail to Genoa in 1823, when for all the years he skippered the *Hercules* he had never made a single voyage to into the Mediterranean; and only a few months earlier, he had sailed from Bristol to Quebec and Montreal? Was all of this simply coincidence --- or is there such a thing as *destiny*?

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