

**Mary O’Connell, *Byron and John Murray: A Poet and His Publisher*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014. Pp. 220. £75. ISBN 9781781381335.**

Mary O’Connell’s exploration of the relationship between Byron and John Murray is a comprehensive analysis of the professional and personal communications between two of the most well known individuals of nineteenth-century literary society, and of the complex nature of the book selling market. In this book, O’Connell reveals the complexities of the author-publisher and writer-reader relationship in early nineteenth-century society.

Byron’s relationship with Murray was by no means straightforward. It was actualised by the machinations of others, such as the introduction of Byron to Murray made by Robert Charles Dallas. It was, moreover, fraught with complexities brought about by Murray’s experience of the publishing market, by Byron’s self-determination as a writer, and by the years Byron spent in self-exile. During Byron’s exile Murray became one of the key recipients of Byron’s not-so-private letters, and used this position to control the information that reached the public sphere. O’Connell confronts this tumultuous relationship by undertaking a chronological review of the relationship between Byron and Murray and marrying close readings of Byron’s works, including discrepancies between editions and manuscript corrections, with the circumstances of Byron’s personal life that affected not only his writing but all those around him.

O’Connell places sociability at the core of her discussion, and acknowledges that Byron and Murray’s professional association was shaped by the presence of others. These included William Gifford, editor of Murray’s *Quarterly Review*, and Byron’s self-nominated protector John Cam Hobhouse. Sociability in Murray’s publishing house was an imperative, and Byron himself was aware that he could never be Murray’s sole author, and that Murray already published eminent bestsellers such as Walter Scott.

A notable aspect of this study is identified by O’Connell at the very beginning: that the role of the publisher and bookseller are not exclusive, and that for Murray these titles could be used interchangeably. Murray surrounded himself with authors in the same way that he surrounded himself with books, as exemplified in a letter to his brother quoted by O’Connell: ‘I transact all of my departments of business in an elegant library, which my Drawing room becomes during the morning where I am in the habits of seeing Persons of the very highest rank [...] such as – Canning – Frere – Mackintosh – Southey – Campbell – Walter Scott – Mad de Stael – Gifford – Croker – Lord Barrow – Lord Byron’ (104). This sociability had great benefits for both Byron and Murray. Murray was particularly gratified by the relationship he fostered between Walter Scott and Byron. O’Connell states that ‘while Byron claimed that he had “not much weight” with his publisher, he used his influence to persuade Murray to publish Coleridge’s *Christabel* and *Kubla Khan* and Leigh Hunt’s *The Story of Rimini*’ (107). Between them, Murray and Byron helped to shape the literary landscape of the nineteenth century.

O’Connell neatly explores the demands that the publishing market placed on both Murray and Byron, reminding us that both the author and publisher had to negotiate concepts of marketability, aesthetics and that ever fickle concept of literary quality. For example, Scott and Southey were particularly critical of those purchasers who were attracted more to the aesthetics of a publication as opposed to its literary quality. By the publication of the first cantos of *Don Juan*, Byron too was critiquing the purchasers of his poetry, and protested that he never intended to write poetry for the popular market. O’Connell interrogates this claim and demonstrates that Murray always ensured that Byron’s works were popular with those who bought into literary works as aesthetic items, as well as those who bought works due to

their literary appeal or merit (noting that the concepts of appeal and merit are not necessarily synonymous).

Overall, *Byron and John Murray* is as much a contribution to studies of sociability, the nineteenth-century publishing world, and the bookselling market place, as it is to accounts of Byron and Byronism. By bringing together reception history, private letters that were exposed to a public world, and Byron's literary works themselves, this book enhances our understanding of the changing literary landscapes of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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