



'Utterly gripping ... a triumph of detective work and literary skill'  
AMANDA FOREMAN

The  
Fall  
of  
the  
House  
of  
Byron

*Scandal  
and  
Seduction  
in  
Georgian  
England*

EMILY BRAND

# I

## The Courtyard

*Rebuilding a Dynasty, 1720–36*

Amidst the court a Gothic fountain play'd,  
Symmetrical, but deck'd with carvings quaint—  
Strange faces, like to men in masquerade,  
And here perhaps a monster, there a saint . . .

*Don Juan, canto XIII*

1722

*The baby is brought screaming into a world of fire and festivity. It is Thursday, 5 November – a day of peculiarly English celebration – and preparations for the evening are under way. Some are constructing crude effigies of the devil, the Pope or a long-dead traitor in old-fashioned clothes. At the Tower and on ships idling along the Thames others load their cannons for the salute at noon. From Newquay to Newcastle townsfolk set up their parades: guildsmen unfurl their flags, musical troupes test their instruments, innkeepers check they have enough ale to satisfy the crowds. The face of the country is pocked with piles of wood, old furniture and household debris, ready to be set ablaze when night falls. It is Gunpowder Treason Day – the anniversary of an old Protestant triumph over a failed Catholic plot – and toasts are proclaimed in dank taverns and at the glittering royal court.*

*Circling a bedchamber at Newstead Abbey, the groans of a young woman in the throes of agony. Her dark hair sticks to her face, her breath comes in gasps. The air in the room is thick with the smell of sweat, blood and the herb concoctions supposed to ease the labour. Servants dash about the house, muttering and carrying out orders. The younger maids summoned to the chamber might be alarmed at the glint of medical*

*instruments, or their mistress's uncharacteristic loss of poise. Her name is Frances, and she is nineteen years old. As her torture seeps through the house, her husband – a peer of the realm – waits for news. He is fifty-two, and hardly a handsome man: a heavy wig frames his drooping dark eyes and prominent nose, and scratches at the sides of his jowled neck. He has been through this before. Five times, in fact, though only two daughters remain. As darkness descends over England, bonfires flicker into life and devour the lifeless effigies of her enemies, to roars of approval. The booms of something like cannon cut into the sky, illuminating it with cascades of sparkling fire that hover momentarily before fading to smoke. William, 4th Lord Byron, has received word from those attending his wife and looks ahead with new hope for the future of his dynasty. A boy, thank God! A boy.*

Gazing back from 1805 is his seventeen-year-old great-grandson George, 6th Lord Byron. Embroiled in a row with his mother, the young man studies a painting of William and interprets his fixed expression as sympathy from beyond the grave. Catherine is 'pouring forth complaints', he writes to his half-sister, 'whilst in the background, the portraits of my Great Grandfather and Grandmother, suspended in their frames, seem to look with an eye of pity on their *unfortunate descendant*'.<sup>1</sup>

George has by now become swept up in a half-imagined history of the Byron family, pieced together from books, peerage lists, the tales of Old Joe and traces of the past clinging to the Abbey itself. He chooses to brood over the salacious and the heroic, and to skirt over the mundane. The carved overmantel in the green drawing room – surely evidence of valiant deeds undertaken during the Crusades? The heraldry hanging in plaster over empty Newstead halls recalls the fluttering banners that rallied his ancestors at the battles of Crécy and Marston Moor. Perhaps he has already concocted the outlandish tales of inherited instability with which he will terrify his friends. ('There always was a madness in the family', he remarks one day to a Harrow classmate, interrupting himself in the middle of a cheerful tune, 'My father cut his throat.')

The ghosts that he first encountered at the Abbey assemble as one remarkable dynasty: this man a hero; this man a villain; and in

## THE COURTYARD

their shadows, the women upholding the family name. Heirs, warriors, mothers and lovers – all acting out the roles they were born to play. Like those curious figures on the courtyard fountain, they present a parade of monsters and saints, and men in masquerade.



As the people of England cleared away the debris of their revelries, the child was given his name: William, after his father and grandfathers. Still adjusting to his new world – all movement and noise – he was baptised in the private chapel in the underbelly of Newstead. His mother Frances took a glazier's diamond to one of the bedroom windows and etched his name alongside that of her daughter:

ISABELLA BYRON BORN NOVEMBER YE 10TH 1721

WILLIAM BYRON BORN NOVEMBER YE 5TH 1722<sup>3</sup>

Relatives, servants and well-wishers cooed over him, offering their gifts and congratulations. He had two sisters: Isabella, not yet one (too small to be bewildered by his sudden arrival), and eleven-year-old Frances, the only surviving child from their father's previous marriage, who was quite old enough to recognise the superior value of a son and heir.

While his existence brought some stability to his immediate family, baby William was born into uncertain and changing times. The kingdom of Great Britain itself was barely out of the cradle, having been formed following the Acts of Union of the Kingdom of England and the Kingdom of Scotland in 1707. Its new royal family, the Hanoverians – Protestants plucked from German obscurity to succeed the inconveniently Catholic Stuart dynasty – had been far from universally welcomed. During William's first winter the newspapers were filled with stories of the recent ill-fated schemes of the 'Jacobites', who hoped to restore the exiled James Edward Stuart to the throne. Elsewhere, understandings of the world itself were shifting as the ancient lure of magic and superstition was slowly suffocated by the march of science. A Westminster election loomed, and the aristocracy continued to nurse its financial wounds after the recent, devastating crash in South Sea Company stocks. A shocking new book – seemingly the tell-all

autobiography of prostitute-turned-penitent Moll Flanders – preoccupied literate society, and was passed with winks and nudges around gentlemen’s clubs. Though it had brightened the hue of the world for his parents, the birth of an heir for Newstead passed with little to no national comment.

As William learned to recognise faces and discovered the full force of his lungs, around him linens were washed and dust was whipped from marble mantelpieces. His mother slowly recovered her strength. Frances did, at least, have youth on her side. She was a slender woman, with dark features and long chestnut hair; sometimes it tumbled over her shoulders, at others she tucked it into a white pleated cap. She loved music, embraced the growing fashion for drinking tea, and had approached her new life at Newstead dutifully, even though it wrenched her so far from her old one. She came from a large family, being the fifth of seven children born to William, 4th Lord Berkeley of Stratton, and having a host of doting aunts and uncles on her maternal side (her own mother was long dead). Her voice may have betrayed a slight Somersetshire twang, picked up during extended childhood summers at Bruton Abbey, her father’s country seat.

Her marriage had been negotiated as the crash of 1720 crippled the court, and it was entirely a matter of business. ‘In the midst of these battles I am going to dispose of one of my daughters to My Lord Byron,’ her father had written pragmatically to a friend; ‘a disproportionate match as to their ages, but marriages not offering every day. I would not miss an opportunity’.<sup>4</sup> (Lord Byron was, in fact, a year older than himself.) She had performed as directed. On a Saturday evening in early December Frances Berkeley took her vows at her father’s house in Kensington, and took up residence in Westminster as Lady Byron. By February she was carrying William’s child. He could not have wished for a more auspicious start. Her own feelings go unrecorded.

Her new husband had always been more comfortable immersed in the arts than in the banter of the House of Lords. He shared her interest in music – his own youthful compositions for the harpsichord had found their way into the theatres of Drury Lane – and was a keen collector of books, antiquities, paintings and prints. Like any

country gentleman, he enjoyed the hunt, and was perfectly placed to pursue the sport in his lands around Sherwood Forest. In middle age he had turned his hand to art and architecture, becoming a patron of painters Michael Dahl – whose portraits filled the Abbey walls – and Peter Tillemans, who was tutoring him in sketching and watercolours. But where his own cash-strapped father had been more concerned with dabbling in poetry than debt management, the 4th Lord was determined not to make the same mistakes. As his children learned to write and lisp out the name Byron (or *Bi-ron*, in the French style, as successive generations often pronounced it), he resolved to do his utmost to marry it to a reputation for good sense and the modern idea of good taste.

Though he had held minor positions in the royal household, he was not politically ambitious. Taking a cautious approach, he established cordial relationships with both the Whig and Tory parties and became known as a man whose vote ‘might be had a certain way’ (this being the means to fund his projects in Nottinghamshire).<sup>5</sup> He had been popular enough at court to secure three financially advantageous marriages: first, to Mary Egerton, sister of the Earl of Bridgewater, who had succumbed to smallpox just six weeks after the wedding; second, to Frances Bentinck, daughter of the Duke of Portland, who provided four children before her death aged twenty-eight. (Her downfall was caused, so the gossip went, by a venereal disease contracted courtesy of her wandering husband: ‘Tis said she died of a distemper her Lord gave her’, Lady Strafford had hinted darkly.)<sup>6</sup> Although by the time of his search for a third wife the only surviving legacy of either union was one daughter – William had lost three sons – his alliances with both families held strong. When his brother-in-law Henry Bentinck was dispatched to a post in Jamaica – most likely never to return – he wrote with the wish that his family would ‘hereafter live happily for the rest of yr days’. He closed with a message from little Frances to her uncle, the sole surviving fragment of her voice: ‘my daughter desires her duty’.<sup>7</sup>

As Lord Byron set about rebuilding his dynasty with his third wife, his already shallow enthusiasm for politics dried up almost completely for the best part of five years. Though Frances had successfully provided an heir, her husband – painfully aware of how precarious these early

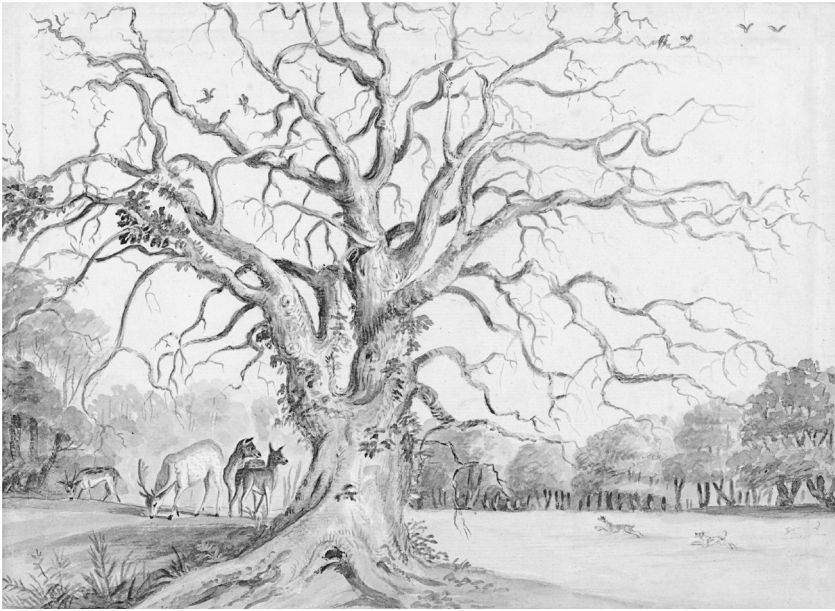
years were – expected to repeat the enterprise as soon as possible. While little Isabella took tentative steps and baby William began to see the world in colour, their mother's belly again began to swell, and amid preparations for their birthdays it became clear that the arrival was imminent. On 8 November 1723, shattering the tranquillity of Newstead: another boy. They named him John, after Frances's eldest brother. The first useful act of the child's life was to provide his parents with an opportunity to nurture friendly relationships in high places. While Frances chose her sister Jane Berkeley to stand as godmother, Lord Byron wrote to his benefactor Thomas Pelham-Holles, Duke of Newcastle – the most prominent landowner in Nottinghamshire and a rising star in government – 'to obtain the Honour of yr being a Godfather to a Son newly Born'.<sup>8</sup> Upon his acceptance, a letter swiftly flew out from Newstead 'to returne yr Grace my thanks and my Wives for the great honour yo[u] have granted us', before concluding soberly, 'I hope my Son will live to acknowledg his obligations himself'.<sup>9</sup> With such an illustrious godparent, little John's start in life was promising. He was baptised at Newstead and his mother tenderly etched his name onto the bedroom window. But her duties were far from over.

Exhibiting a remarkable talent for regularity, Frances noticed the tell-tale signs of pregnancy for a fourth consecutive spring. But this time, as the birth approached and the Abbey grounds turned from lush green to bleak, wet orange, the atmosphere in the household was different. The children were ushered away from their thirteen-year-old half-sister Frances, who had begun to cough violently and grow feverish and frail. Consumption. She died on 21 September 1724 and was buried with her mother and brothers in the Byron family vault at nearby Hucknall church, severing their father's final link with his former family. Though she remained forever fixed in a playful pose at her elder brother's side in one of the Newstead portraits, it is unlikely that her younger siblings would remember her – Isabella was not yet three.

The lingering grief that hung about the Abbey was interrupted by Frances's labour pains and the arrival of a third son – Richard – who ruined the run of November birthdays by making his entrance on 28 October. The chaplain pressed water to his forehead; his mother took her diamond to the bedroom window.

*'Unacquainted with the vicissitudes of fortune'*

While their father busied himself with building plans and shot about the country bidding on antiques, the children gathered up their earliest experiences at Newstead, where the silver and silk of fashionable living collided with the rudeness of rural life. Silver rattles, their christening gifts of silver plate, silver-laced garments and the glint of silver pots steaming with cocoa or tea; red silk cushions, their mother's sweeping skirts, the sumptuous hangings billowing over four-poster beds. Elsewhere, the familiar barking and snuffling of their father's hounds, the feeling of delicate flowers pulled from the earth by their inquisitive fingers, and mud-flecked labourers spotted through windows, repairing fences and tending the gardens.



*This undated watercolour, View of a Park with Deer, by William, 4th Lord Byron may have captured something of the rural serenity of Newstead.*



The children found sights and sounds to fire their imaginations at every turn. They passed their days with those employed to raise them: nursemaids fussed about them in coloured skirts and flapping caps; men darted down the corridors and about the stables in bright red livery. Outside, there was a lake with a little rowing boat, rolling green gardens dotted with frolicking statues, and thick woodlands filled with plants and interesting creatures. Inside, the walls were hung with gilt-framed mirrors reflecting their own little faces, and countless pictures including skilful watercolours and sketches by both of their parents.

The walls of the Great Dining Hall were crowded with portraits: a gaunt old man dressed in black, with a huge, gleaming white beard (their four times great-grandfather). A greasy-haired soldier with a black scar on his cheek, pictured with his horse and his slave, pointing at nothing (a twice times great-uncle). Alongside these long-dead relatives were two large portraits of their parents, painted by Michael Dahl around the time of their marriage: their ageing father stern and sagging in his parliamentary robes, and his young bride posing by a harpsichord in a gown of pale pink and green. (Nearby, perhaps not alleviating Frances's creeping dislike of the place, were two portraits of her husband's short-lived first wife, and four of his second.)

There was an extensive library of ancient and modern books, one day bound to appeal to the romantic Isabella and the studious Richard. Sometimes the sound of the harpsichord, fiddle or wooden bagpipe echoed through the house from the Great Gallery (perhaps their father treated them to one of his old compositions, 'Ye Ld Byron's Scotch Tune'). Nods to history and heroics stood at every corner – a suit of armour in one of the upstairs passageways, and paintings of naval battles that were bound to appeal to the young boys. Some of the rooms were dominated by hunting trophies: the glassy eyes of a huge stag in the Grand Hall; an elk staring blankly in the Great Gallery; bucks' heads in the parlours and servants' halls. Had they stolen into their father's study, they might have coveted his model horses or, stowed away elsewhere, his collection of swords and guns.

Renovations whirled around them as their mother was permitted a (short) respite from adding to the nursery and their father focused

on his secondary mission – the dull courtyard was transformed into an elegant turning circle for carriages; grimy ecclesiastical windows were bricked over and bright sash windows installed; dark panelling was swept away in favour of light, painted wood. The new, warren-like suite of apartments might have provided better hiding places than the creaking, high-ceilinged halls. Perhaps they caught snatches of servants' chatter about improvements made to the old bakery, brewhouse and kitchen.

While the children learned and played, their father's portly and asthmatic friend Mr Tillemans captured the Abbey's progress in oil and watercolours. He also immortalised those living and working there: the prized racehorses and their grooms; Lord and Lady Byron riding on the east front, old William in cream and Frances's red dress spilling over one side of her horse. His liveliest picture, however, was an intimate scene of the family and servants gathered together in the Great Dining Hall, including three of the children (either the three eldest or the three boys, depending on who made the cut). In it, a fiddler plays an energetic tune as people dance, chat amongst themselves or embrace one another. A beagle pads about the floor. The infants gaze around with wide-eyed curiosity or try to wriggle free of their nursemaids, while their father observes the festivities with a drink. This frozen moment of shared revelry gave a flush of delight to the servants who appeared in it – one later visitor described how the housekeeper showed him a number of paintings including this 'good pretty one of all his servants dancing together' and enthusiastically named every person featured.<sup>10</sup>

A fifth Byron sibling made his appearance in the spring of 1726, apparently a time of particular fruitfulness for Nottinghamshire's affluent families. As another record was etched on the Abbey window – CHARLES BYRON BORN APRIL 6TH 1726 – he was swiftly followed by an heir for the neighbouring Saviles of Rufford Abbey and a second son, christened William, for Mr and Mrs Chaworth of Annesley Hall. Notes of congratulation flew across the county as the fashionable world descended on their rural estates for the summer. There was little John's godfather the Duke of Newcastle at Clumber Park, plus two newly entitled teenage lords: William Bentinck, Duke of Portland, who inherited Welbeck Abbey following his father's

death in Jamaica, and Evelyn Pierrepont, Duke of Kingston, of Thoresby Hall. As well as the Chaworths and the Saviles, the genteel families active in local politics included the elderly baronet Francis Molyneux at Teversall, Tory stalwarts the Willoughbys of Wollaton Hall and the newly married Montagus at Papplewick. The names and faces of this genteel if not exactly glittering set of neighbours gradually became familiar to the Byron children, who observed their manners at church and in flower-scented drawing rooms during the obligatory rounds of social calls.

News from across the country provided entertaining tattle – “Rabbits or no Rabbits” has been the great dispute this week’ cried the newspapers, as the nation was swept up in a story of a woman from Surrey who had allegedly begun giving birth to litters of them.<sup>11</sup> (It was later proved to be a hoax, but not before a number of prominent physicians unwisely staked their reputations on it.) But while the adult world turned on polite chitchat and petty disputes, the children merely judged it by its gilded coaches and handsome gowns, the flashes of silvery fish in the lakes around Newstead and the nursemaids tetchily prising their sticky fingers from things they shouldn’t be touching. Life at the Abbey had provided a relatively gentle introduction to the intoxicating high society of the early Georgian era, but – to their mother’s relief – they were about to become better acquainted with the dazzling lights of the city. The summer of 1727 brought some life-changing news. Their father was required in London: the old king was dead.

The servants piled the family’s belongings – and the five squirming children under six – into carriages bound for their house in town: 15 Great Marlborough Street. After what seemed to be an age of jolting through the countryside, the city was a rush of noise for little ears: cries of street-sellers and ballad singers, yelping dogs and horses’ hooves, voices chattering in unfamiliar languages, the jangling of coins in purses. Raucous laughter spilled from taverns. They rode past dirty children in drab, coarse clothes, who idled on pavements or darted across streets, narrowly avoiding the gentlefolk being conveyed around in sedan chairs (and the notoriously foul-mouthed men who carried them).

Eventually they clattered briskly down a spacious street in

## THE COURTYARD

Westminster, and modern townhouses stretched above them on either side. It was not as grand as a *square* or a *crescent*, but according to one tourist of the time it surpassed 'any thing that is called a Street, in the Magnificence of its Buildings and Gardens, and inhabited all by prime Quality'.<sup>12</sup> They drew up at number 15. The house was large, with several floors looking down onto a neat garden, coach houses and stabling. Though no plan for the building survives, an inventory of the property next door gives some impression of its likely interior: four elegant rooms on the first floor, a dining room, four bedchambers, as well as the garrets, kitchen, washhouse and pantry used by the servants. Their father had ensured the house was prepared and furnished for their arrival, dressing the rooms with antiquities and paintings, bringing over some card-tables and hanging the staircase with prints. Marking their return to town in style, he purchased a coach with red silk reins.

It was a fashionable Westminster address that allowed their father easy access to the House of Lords plus the city's prestigious clubs and assembly rooms. He had been letting the house to Henry Howard, heir to the Earl of Carlisle, and his young family – illustrious shoes to fill – and their neighbours included lords, ladies, military heroes and Members of Parliament. (Fashionable society was, for the moment, cloaked in black to observe the official mourning period for the late king.) Far from the leafy shades of Sherwood Forest, the children were thrust into the heart of one of the largest cities in the world. Just to the north was the thoroughfare Tyburn Road (soon to be renamed Oxford Street), along which condemned criminals were paraded on their way to Tyburn gallows. From the windows of the upper storeys the view to the south offered another reminder of the fleeting nature of life: the bright, bustling Carnaby Market a stone's throw from an old burial ground. Nearby St James's Park filled with well-to-do folk during the winter afternoons and warm summer evenings, while residents of the city's upscale brothels preened themselves around St James's Square and at the notorious Mrs Needham's in Park Place. Childish screeches rose from the yard of the prestigious Westminster School and those of the workhouses and charity schools springing up near the river. Peers and Members scurried between the houses of Parliament –

then held in the cluster of crumbling medieval buildings that made up the Palace of Westminster – its surrounding coffee houses and the royal court.

Further afield, the city of London itself – still emerging from the ashes of the Great Fire of 1666 – was in the middle of a building boom. People and money poured into the capital, descending upon the markets of Covent Garden or the brand-new development of luxury shops at New Bond Street. The children's parents might have been tempted by the booksellers and stationers or the millineries filled with ribbons and lace. Experimental confections and exquisitely crafted wooden dolls and toys were set up in shop windows, and by the doorways of certain establishments wafts of chocolate and coffee went some way to masking the general lingering smell of soot and sewers.

In October 1727 the city temporarily resumed its colour for the coronation of the new king – George II – and Westminster was transformed into a heaving mass of giddy spectators hoping for a glimpse of the parade. It was an extravagant event, seen only once in some lifetimes and in others not at all. Somewhere amid the solemn procession from Westminster Hall to Westminster Abbey – around halfway along – were Lord and Lady Byron, cloaked in their crimson robes and clutching their coronets. (The honour was not cheap – a fellow peer, Lord Ailesbury, had spent over eighty pounds (approaching £10,000 today) on the necessary robes, gloves, lace, gold ribbons and ermine.) The crowd sniggered to see a fatigued sixty-seven-year-old Dowager Duchess of Marlborough commandeer a musician's drum and plant herself on it during a drag in the procession. The Abbey doors opened – 'God save King GEORGE the Second! Long live King GEORGE!' – and afterwards a banquet in the packed Hall. It was a long day. Lord and Lady Byron returned to Great Marlborough Street hours later, wondering how best to court the favour of their new royal family.

Fortunately, the Byrons were not without friends in town. With the change in regime boosting their father's enthusiasm for actually turning up at the House of Lords, politics may have become a more common topic of conversation at Great Marlborough Street. The family attended the neat redbrick church of St James's on Piccadilly,

where a congregation of the first quality discreetly eyed each other's dress, hairstyles and manners. The children were toddled about the green avenues of St James's Park, entertained by the ducks and the tame deer, while their parents dashed off letters to friends and associates of varying respectability. They remained on intimate terms with the Bentincks and the Egertons (in which family there were a number of children for the young Byrons to play with); among the less reputable were the debauched gambling enthusiast Sir John Tyrwhitt and cockfighting devotee Lord Lovell, both of whom owed their father significant sums. As for family, there were few relatives left on their father's side. The children had just two childless aunts in their late fifties – Catherine, Lady Ranelagh, who lived in Ireland, and the unmarried Juliana: their faces, at least, would have been familiar, since portraits of both women (plus Lord Ranelagh) graced the walls of Newstead.

Their mother's family was vast in comparison, and supplied more regular visitors. Lord Berkeley, their only living grandparent, was a smart-looking man with a tightly curled grey wig, who had not relished the burden of bringing up daughters and had a tendency to nit-pick. He observed with dismay that the last few years had done no favours for Frances's looks. He now preferred exploring grand country estates to the 'solitude' of London where, he wrote to a friend plaintively, 'most of my acquaintance are gone and the time past for making new'.<sup>13</sup> The children probably knew their mother's beloved aunt Elizabeth Temple, who wore a small ruby ring inset with their entwined hair. Their own six Berkeley aunts and uncles, all in their twenties and early thirties, were also familiar faces. Their uncles: John Berkeley, married but childless; Charles, the youngest; and William, who had followed family tradition into the navy. Two aunts unmarried: John's godmother Jane (destined to die a spinster) and twenty-year-old Anne (destined to be killed by childbirth). And finally their twenty-two-year-old aunt Barbara – her portrait also hung at Newstead (though it was not a very good likeness) – who had followed her sister's example and been married off to a fifty-nine-year-old widower, John Trevanion of Caerhays Castle. When not in Cornwall the Trevanions settled just a few minutes' walk away at Charles Street, providing the siblings with

some new cousins and playmates: William Trevanion was born in 1727, followed by Frances in 1728. In 1729 the sisters fell pregnant within a few months of each other – as Barbara was unlacing her stays to accommodate the growing bump, Frances was already preparing for her lying-in period.

A fifth and final son – born at Great Marlborough Street on 22 May 1730 – was the only Byron sibling whose name was not etched onto Newstead itself. The family's recent efforts in courting favour had clearly reaped rewards: the baby's godparents were Scroop Egerton, Duke of Bridgewater (William's brother-in-law), Sophia, Duchess of Kent (William's sister-in-law and Frances's cousin) and – remarkably – King George II. Some newspapers even reported that the new monarch performed the baptism, and 'named him *George*', after himself.<sup>14</sup> (He certainly gave a gift of 110 ounces of gilt plate worth £65, around £7,500 in modern currency.) Having evidently struck up a friendship with the king, their favour at court seemed secure. If little Isabella was disappointed in hopes of finally having a sister, she might have been consoled by the arrival of another cousin – Sophia Trevanion – on 8 July. Sophia's baptism held two weeks later at St Margaret's, the old church nestled next to Westminster Abbey, was the last for either family. The Byron and Trevanion nurseries – which would be linked again in adulthood – were complete.

By the time of baby George's arrival his three eldest siblings, aged between six and eight, were already being shaped for polite society. Dark-haired Isabella was growing into a miniature of her mother, and fidgeted in restricting dresses, stays and petticoats. Both William and John had made the symbolic passage into adulthood that was being 'breeched' – most boys swapped the cotton shifts worn by all infants for boys' breeches at the age of five or six. It was unfamiliar and uncomfortable at first, but generally a moment of pride. The nursery, of course, remained a scene of childish things: screams and scuffles, scolding nursemaids, teething toys and the building blocks, hobby horses and picture books that made up the paraphernalia of upper-class play. Here the children jostled for their places in their own sibling hierarchy, forging the relationships that would provide the basis for their long lives. (It is perhaps here that William, if his character in adulthood is any indication, became used to getting his way.)

Keeping a brood of six healthy presented a challenge, and thoughts of the endless litany of illnesses that threatened fragile young lives were never far away. While the baby was almost certainly breastfed by a trusted nursemaid (aristocratic mothers at this time were, for the most part, distinctly hands-off in this respect), if they came down with minor complaints Frances would swiftly be able to administer the oils, herbs and spices of her inherited home-made remedies. They might have been one of the families to place trust in the new and pioneering inoculation against smallpox, though having a father approaching sixty may have steered them towards more old-fashioned medicine.

Though the day-to-day practicalities of raising a child – in all its messy, unseemly chaos – were more properly dealt with by servants, their parents were responsible for cultivating their minds. The prevailing wisdom about education maintained that children were to be considered ‘as white paper or wax to be moulded and fashioned’, making these early years crucial in determining a child’s character, interests and abilities.<sup>15</sup> Physical discipline was acceptable, especially if the child’s disposition seemed to require it. Before they reached an age for formal tutoring, the children went to church and became familiar with the teachings of the family chaplain, and were perhaps exposed to the moralising ballads and poems that constituted children’s literature. Both girls and boys were encouraged to learn from touch, smell and sight, and explore the qualities of herbs, trees, metals and minerals.

The contrast between the bustle of Westminster and the serenity of Newstead – with its waterfalls, wildlife and seasonal cloaks of snowdrops, bilberries and yellow gorse – provided a useful introduction to both the natural world and urban living. As children of the aristocracy, the young Byrons were also obliged to learn how to speak, behave and present themselves in a manner appropriate to their social position. In their earliest years they were taught the rudiments of politeness – ‘that when you answer *Yes* or *No*, you must always add *Madam* or *Sir*, &c.’ – and were gradually introduced to the various branches of intellectual life.<sup>16</sup> (One parenting guide of 1721 declared that children should be given ‘the relish, as much as possible, for the pleasures of the mind; such as conversation, news,



history, and some kinds of sports, which require industry and attention, and contain something instructive'.<sup>17</sup>) As their learning progressed, their father's library offered glimpses into new worlds of knowledge, and visiting tutors – usually older, respectable gentlemen – taught them the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic (with the happy secondary consequence of polishing away any uncouth habits picked up from the servants).

Exposure to society provided valuable opportunities to widen their vocabulary and observe the rules of the adult world – it was perhaps here that little William developed his lifelong tendency for posturing and his thirst for praise. They might be allowed some missteps in childhood, but as adults an inappropriate comment or peculiar outfit could instantly mark them out as vulgar or absurd. 'If from your position in life, you are destined to pass it among those, who are called fashionable,' Isabella herself later cautioned, it was necessary to 'arm yourself with a strong preparation of reason and resolution'.<sup>18</sup> Negotiating the so-called beau monde was as much a performance as it was a pleasure, but with earls, dukes and royals as godparents – their mother never failed to mention that 'I have the honour to be well known to the King' when seeking favours – the children were beginning life on an excellent footing.<sup>19</sup>

Here, Isabella's education took a different path from that of her brothers. She was eight years old when her youngest brother was born, and facing a decade of training for the mission of her young life: matrimony. (Her parents were perhaps already compiling mental lists of eligible bachelors.) Though his finances were stable it was unlikely that Lord Byron could tempt a potential son-in-law with an especially substantial dowry, so they were relying largely on whatever charms Isabella herself managed to cultivate. In case she did not grow to be considered a 'beauty' – perhaps they glanced nervously at the mole beneath her lip – it was crucial to demonstrate the requisite accomplishments and social graces to make up for it. Etiquette guides laid down a seemingly endless list of rules. Young ladies should behave with modesty. They should not laugh too much. They should not slouch, or dance with unbecoming enthusiasm, or contradict gentlemen in conversation. Even where girls were instructed that learning was more important than obsessing over

their appearance, they were warned that it was improper to flaunt it. ‘Silence always becomes a young lady,’ wrote the Marchioness de Lambert, who otherwise championed cultivating the intellect, ‘the greatest prudence lies in speaking little’.<sup>20</sup>

In reality, however, a girl’s education was not only coloured by but at the mercy of the personalities and priorities of her parents – especially her mother. Even decades later it was remarked that girls ‘are taught what their parents or guardians judge is necessary or useful for them to learn, and they are taught nothing else’.<sup>21</sup> Isabella may have been reflecting on her own childhood when she later wrote that female education ‘sometimes accustomed the mind to credulity, from the pleasure that the marvellous then afforded’.<sup>22</sup> That she grew to be impulsive, flirtatious and too eager to indulge the longings of her heart, she is more likely to have owed to the influence of her young mother than her conscientious father.

At eight, Isabella was just the right age to commence her social education, where a ‘variety of good company’ was rightly supposed to be ‘of more use in forming a gracious manner from the ages of seven to fourteen than seven years after that’.<sup>23</sup> The most valuable opportunities for learning came with a rap at the door. She watched and listened as dazzling visitors were swept in to take tea or coffee and admire the house, and was occasionally brought before the company to practise her manners or display her accomplishments. Less illustrious visitors were more likely to be received with groans. Tutors. Though she shared some studies with her brothers – she needed to be literate enough to display sense in conversation, and master arithmetic in order to manage household accounts – Isabella’s lessons were designed to render her interesting, attractive and graceful: dancing, sketching, singing and languages (she certainly had French and some Latin as a young woman). She took to art and music – inheriting the personal passions of her parents – and somewhere in this girlhood also blossomed a lifelong interest in the natural world.

Though the boys were encouraged to learn modern languages, the arts and how to dance (clumsy feet would not win the heart of an heiress), countless other opportunities opened up before them. Physical pursuits, such as horse-riding and shooting, had the benefit of eroding any lingering effeminate ‘softness’, an unfortunate

symptom of being brought up by nursemaids. (William and John certainly inherited their father's passion for the hunt.) Unlike Isabella, they might read their father's books on military history, politics and geography with an eye to one day making their own mark on public life or exploring those distant lands themselves, if they wished. While their sister was polished for the marriage market, for them the country's top schools beckoned, at whatever age their parents deemed appropriate and for however long they wished to pay. Through interactions with their parents, servants, tutors and superior families they learned their place in the world: that William would inherit, and the four younger brothers might expect to take up roles in the military, politics or the clergy. That their aristocratic birth set them apart – somewhat indefinably but indisputably – from the scrawny, dirty-kneed children they saw running about the streets of Westminster.

In the spring of 1731, as the older boys contemplated the prospect of entering school, the routine of study and social calls was shattered with a new arrival: fever. Seven-year-old John and five-year-old Charles were confined to their beds – soaked in sweat, whimpering, their pulses racing – and the other children were ushered away. A creeping dread settled on the household as the physician was called. Long hours passed and no improvement; maids waited on them, sat up with them, attempted to cool them; windows were kept closed to keep out foul air. They might have been treated with cordials of common herbs, but if the fever was considered inflammatory the medical professionals would have encouraged opening their veins and draining blood to reduce the excessive 'heat' of their small bodies. Long, agonising days, and still no change. The household fell into prayer. They could only wait for the fevers either to break, or take their boys. On 16 May, a few weeks after his fifth birthday, little Charles's breathing grew increasingly shallow and eventually stopped.

Amid their grief, a mire of administration – medical bills and funeral arrangements – as John remained in a delirium. His brother's tiny coffin was privately interred at St James's church and the family shuffled back into the daylight – the rector had four more burials that day, three of them children. John remained 'at the point of Death'.<sup>24</sup> A vigilant watch was kept, and his days passed in a painful

blur as the rest of the household made their pleas and promises to God. Finally, just over a week after the death of his brother, John opened his eyes and fixed his gaze more clearly on something – a face, perhaps, or a picture on the wall. He was out of danger. By the end of the month the *Daily Advertiser* declared that John was ‘in a fair way of Recovery’.<sup>25</sup> It was the first of his many displays of remarkable resilience in the face of death.

The family spent the summer in mourning, and Lord and Lady Byron decided it was time to dispatch the older boys to Westminster School. It was a conventional but not uncontested choice, at a time when the relative merits of public education or private tuition were hotly debated among the fashionable classes. The lessons at the prestigious boys’ schools – Eton, Westminster, Harrow and Winchester – focused on the ancient languages, in which a gentleman must be proficient if he wished to excel. Packing his son off to Westminster at around the same time, Lord Chesterfield advised him to ‘mind your Greek particularly, for to know Greek very well is to be really learned: there is no great credit in knowing Latin, for everybody knows it’.<sup>26</sup>

But public education was intended to instil confidence and character as much as verbs and vocabulary, and it provided a boy with an invaluable opportunity to forge friendships that could serve him well for the rest of his life. Thrust into an ungentle world, students were forced to cut the apron strings of boyhood and were trained up to be the next generation of public figures. On the other hand, some parents feared – not without reason – that launching their impressionable boys into such an environment could be distressing and even dangerous. At best, new starters would be robbed of any lingering innocent ideas by the swaggering older boys; at worst, they were removed from the relative safety of their homes and voluntarily delivered into a potential breeding ground for disease. It was not an experience that suited those of a disposition ‘where there was any gentleness’, and many hated it.<sup>27</sup>

‘If you don’t let me come home, I die’, wrote one suffering seven-year-old to his mother from Westminster, desperate to be rescued. ‘I am all over ink, and my fine clothes have been spoilt – I have been tost in a blanket, and seen a ghost.’<sup>28</sup> In adulthood

the poet William Cowper, a schoolmate of youngest brother George a few years later, declared somewhat bitterly that parents choose public schooling ‘only because they want to get rid of their Little ones and know not where else to dispose of them’.<sup>29</sup>

The Byrons found some middle ground in choosing Westminster School, which was sufficiently distinguished but also within two miles of their own house – the boys may even have foregone the usual course of boarding during term time and returned to Great Marlborough Street outside of classes. In February 1732 nine-year-old William and eight-year-old John, the latter clearly recovered from his early brush with death, were dispatched there together and plunged into a boisterous crush of some 300 other pupils. They may, like their near contemporary Philip Stanhope, have been advised by their parents to be on their guard against picking up ‘ill-bred, and disgusting habits’ such as ‘scratching yourself, putting your fingers in your mouth, nose, and ears’.<sup>30</sup> (Though his father Lord Chesterfield believed it to be the best place to teach a boy to ‘shift for himself and bustle in the world’, he had to concede that Westminster School specifically was also ‘undoubtedly, the seat of illiberal manners and brutal behaviour’.)<sup>31</sup> Perhaps more taxing was the monotony of lessons: shuffling into cold classrooms, commencing and concluding with Latin prayers, staring at grammar books and hoping not to be picked for an impromptu test on the previous day’s work. Happily for the boys, their headmaster, Dr Nichol, was renowned for his relatively benevolent reign, generally sparing the rod and relying instead on instilling a sense of honour in his pupils. Unfortunately, such sympathy could not be counted on among the students.

As the sons of a peer, the Byron boys may have felt some advantage when it came to finding their place in the pecking order. Either way, it was best to show one’s mettle from the first day. John was later credited with having quickly established a reputation for physical prowess, throwing himself into boxing matches with his schoolfellows and emerging as ‘champion of his form’.<sup>32</sup> (Though this dubious early history loses credibility somewhat with the false claim that he was eventually expelled after a sexual encounter with the girl who cleaned his bedchamber.) However well they adjusted to their new circumstances, reports of their early weeks must have

met with their parents' satisfaction, as seven-year-old Richard was packed off to join them in June.

As their juvenile years passed in seasonal cycles of study and improvement – curtseys, bows, country summers and city winters – the five remaining siblings nurtured their individual talents and interests. Young William and John asked eager questions about riding and shooting, and perhaps about their uncle William's seafaring missions; Isabella and Richard sketched copies of Rubens and Rembrandts. As they learned, played and made mistakes – exercising all the naivety and optimism of those Isabella later called 'young persons, unacquainted with the vicissitudes of fortune' – their parents continued to dabble in public life.<sup>33</sup> While she was pregnant with George their mother had become one of the very first 'Ladys of Charity' to lend her name in support of a proposed Foundling Hospital in the city, and she followed the campaign for royal approval with interest. (This pioneering campaign, which aimed to take in abandoned or impoverished infants, was a bold choice – its critics declared that such kindness would simply encourage vice among the lower classes.)

Frances may simply have wished to ally herself with a fashionable cause, or perhaps hoped to distract herself from the fact that the years had taken their toll. Though she was only just in her thirties, when her father's friend Lord Strafford spotted her in town he barely recognised her. 'I do not wonder you should not know her', replied her father somewhat unfeelingly, 'for I hardly recollect her myself. What with children and an old husband she has quite lost her youth.'<sup>34</sup> It was probably lost on the children, to whom a mother will always seem something of a relic, whatever her age. Frances's sorrows were compounded with the death of her 'intrepid, gentle' brother Captain William Berkeley while commanding a voyage between Africa and Barbados.<sup>35</sup> He was just thirty-three. If his adventurous career had already inspired his nephews with ideas of a life at sea, his grave at the bottom of the ocean was a stark warning of its dangers.

In recent years their father – now approaching his mid sixties – had been increasingly active in politics. Drawn under the wing of his Whig patron the Duke of Newcastle, his attendance at Parliament

had risen to a dizzying height of thirty-eight per cent in 1731 (perhaps in recognition of the royal blessing bestowed upon his baby boy) and had since settled at around thirty-four per cent. If it nagged at him that he was relying on a diminishing set of old allies, he was not sufficiently moved to cultivate new ones, though his deteriorating health increasingly confined him to Great Marlborough Street. He had grown old – to his children he must have seemed positively ancient.

*I do hereby give and bequeath'*

Lord Byron passed the Christmas season of 1734 struggling with such a persistent and aggressive illness that the newspapers declared 'his Life was despaired of'.<sup>36</sup> It cast an unflattering light over his financial circumstances. An improvement in the spring prompted a flurry of letters to the Duke of Newcastle about the pensions promised to him by the late king (now in arrears to the tune of £2,000). 'It's but a bad excuse,' he wrote from Newstead, 'because I've no other friend left (about Court) but yr Grace'.<sup>37</sup>

When he relapsed during the whirl of November birthdays – Isabella, already fourteen! – the lawyers were called. His will, which had been drawn up after the death of his daughter Frances a decade earlier, prioritised preserving his estates for his dynasty over releasing immediate funds for those he left behind. His 'dear wife' was to be allowed 'all her Jewells and other Ornaments of her Person', plus a sum of £500 for her personal use.<sup>38</sup> Along with her father Lord Berkeley, she was appointed a co-guardian of the children and given control of the family assets until their son William turned twenty-one – providing she did not remarry. (The clause protected his fortune from the potential meddling of any new husband.) Any future sales or resettlements of the family lands would need to be agreed by the incumbent heirs. While he had originally stipulated that 'my sons shall continue with my wife till they be fit to put to school', another worrying bout of illness in December 1735 prompted him to appoint his trusted chaplain to assist with both the guardianship of the children and the management of the Nottinghamshire estates. (He

perhaps did not entirely trust his father-in-law to exert himself on their behalf, or his young wife to take care of Newstead.) Legalities settled, he took a carriage away from the grime of London to the health-giving spa at Bath.

As their father slipped in and out of danger, life continued for the siblings. Isabella focused on her accomplishments, enjoying the hours spent sketching copies of grand, unreachable landscapes and avidly reading – she later declared that embracing books and her faith in early life was ‘laying up a treasure for the latter part of it’.<sup>39</sup> After three years at Westminster School, Richard had been brought back home to continue his education with his sister – perhaps he had proved too sensitive for the boisterous environment (certainly his talents seemed to lie in quieter, more reflective pursuits).

Among their tutors was the esteemed artist and drawing master Joseph Goupy, who was an associate of their father’s old favourites Tillemans and Dahl, and fashionable enough to have both taught the royal family and developed gout. The serenity of Great Marlborough Street was sporadically shattered by the return of William and John, with tales of scholastic misdeeds or new arrivals among their classmates – their Nottinghamshire neighbours, the two Chaworth boys, twelve-year-old Patricius and nine-year-old William, enrolled at the school in February 1736. (Little did they know then how tragically the two families would be entwined in their adulthood.)

Their mother, perhaps increasingly sensitive about her disappearing beauty, fell into talks with up-and-coming artist William Hogarth and commissioned a new portrait. She did not wish to be portrayed as a doting mother or dutiful wife to an old, ailing lord, but as a smiling and self-assured baroness. The painting captured a serene Frances in a cream satin gown and gloves, her hair modestly tucked into a white cap. She drips with jewellery: as well as a matching pearl choker necklace and earrings, she wears a ring on the little finger of her left hand. A scrappy terrier plays about her feet. It is not the pose of a woman concerned about the future, or even about the fact that her husband is lying on his deathbed.

In late July 1736 London was boiling over with anger and fear. A small explosion of gunpowder filled Westminster Hall with ‘noise, flame and smoak’ and left behind a scattering of seditious pamphlets.<sup>40</sup>



The Irish neighbourhoods in the east were targeted by resentful mobs – discontent about cheaper immigrant labourers ‘stealing’ English jobs had escalated into riots and shootings. Coffee-house waitresses caught snatches of conversation about uncertain alliances in Europe and recent sightings in Bermuda of a sea-monster with the tail of a fish and the torso of a raven-haired youth. The children’s attention might have been caught by the news that the vicious highwayman known as ‘Turpin the Butcher’ had evaded capture yet again.

At Newstead, far from all of this, William, 4th Lord Byron struggled to keep up his spirits. He had travelled to the Abbey – presumably with at least some of his family – for a final summer. It was his masterpiece. The house was not finished, exactly, but undeniably elevated to new heights of beauty. Visitors fell into raptures.

‘We were yesterday at Lord Byron’s, a Glorious fine park & a fine old house’ – ‘A fine library joins to the gallery and in it is a most noble collection of books’ – ‘In front of the house there is a fine cascade, that tumbles over about 30 steps’ – ‘I saw every Thing in the Neighbourhood worth looking at; but what pleased me most was Lord Byron’s Abbey upon the Forest’.<sup>41</sup>

In the sixteen years since his marriage to Frances, he had also accomplished the second major project of his later life: his dynasty had been secured. His five surviving children had already made their own mark on Newstead. Isabella’s bedchamber was a cheerful ray of yellow, with plaid curtains and tapestries livening up the walls. In the boys’ room were feather beds draped in red, a scattering of old prints and a model of a ship. This success must have been some consolation as the apothecary, physician and surgeon hovered gravely at his bedside, dispensing advice and pain relief as other, more familiar, faces worked respectfully about him. His steward Mr Marks, Tom and John the footmen, Sarah the maid – all passed long, difficult nights ‘sitting up with my Lord in his illness’, but it only tightened its grip.<sup>42</sup>

Having spent the best part of two years intermittently incapacitated by bad health, William, 4th Lord Byron finally died at Newstead on Sunday, 8 August 1736, leaving Frances a widow at thirty-three. Four days later mourners assembled in black as he was interred in

the Byron family vault at Hucknall church, and the *London Evening Post* printed a careless obituary that misnamed his daughter 'Arabella' and revived little Charles, who had been dead for six years.<sup>43</sup> Other notices more accurately recalled his history – some conquering ancestors, an old position in the royal household, a wife dead of smallpox, a family wiped out – but no heroic deeds to inspire national grief. His lasting legacy was for his family alone: Newstead Abbey.

The five fatherless siblings found themselves in a kind of limbo. Their bright gowns and suits were put away – the death of a parent usually required a child to wear mourning clothes for a full year. Some of their father's trinkets had been distributed among the younger siblings as a token of remembrance for him. John was allowed a treasure: his pocket watch. Though thirteen-year-old William – now 5th Lord Byron – took up the mantle as head of the family, there were seven years until he could legally assume control of its estates and fortune. Isabella, on the cusp of adulthood, would remain under his legal protection until she found a husband. Twelve-year-old John may have already set his sights on a life at sea, following in the footsteps of his ill-fated uncle. Richard, established more comfortably back at home, practised his painting and little George was only just of the age to be proudly graduating to breeches.

The will was read and at first it seemed conventional, if prudent. Jewels for Frances, plus the use of the London house as long as she remained unmarried. The estates, furniture and works of art to his eldest son, and set sums of money for his younger children. But in reality it left them with a restricted income – word quickly spread that William had 'very little to live upon while his Mother lives who is a very young widdow'. 'Lady Byron I am sure will do nothing that is disagreeable,' wrote one of the Duke of Newcastle's agents, with a hint of uncertainty, 'consistent with ye care she owes her family which wants all the assurance she can possible [*sic*] give them'.<sup>44</sup> At Great Marlborough Street, Frances surveyed the assets under her guardianship to ascertain what could be converted into cash. She made lists of those who owed her late husband money, and – on the advice of her family – planned to apply to the king for an annual pension of £500 on her son's behalf. Newcastle heard from his concerned local agents about her plans for her son's greatest asset,

Newstead. Frances's lack of affection for the place seems to have been common knowledge – when Lady North later visited the estate she remarked, 'I am amased [*sic*] how my L[ad]y could hate it so much.'<sup>45</sup> She certainly didn't waste time in attempting to dispose of it. By October, letters flew from Nottingham with the news, 'Newstead, the Seat of ye late Lord Biron is to be let'.<sup>46</sup>

With their father's sisters by now both dead – cutting them adrift from any other Byron relatives – and their mother already picking at the family estate, the young siblings were left to consider how to carve their own paths in the world.