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## Lord Byron at the Armenian Monastery on San Lazzaro

Arpena Mesrobian

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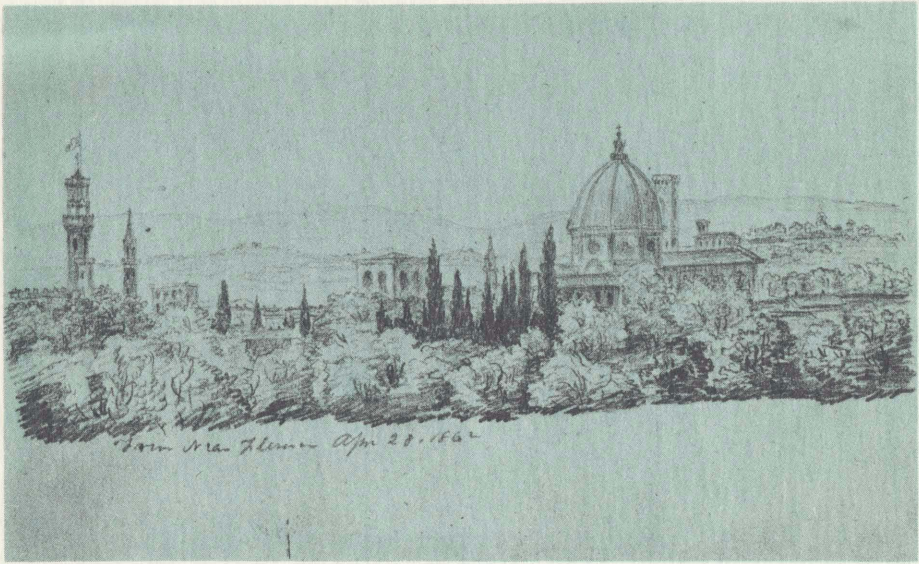
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Florence, 1862, by George Fisk Comfort. From his "Italian Tour Sketch Book" in Syracuse University Archives.

# THE COURIER

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# *Lord Byron at the Armenian Monastery on San Lazzaro*

by Arpena Mesrobian

George Gordon, Lord Byron, arrived in Venice on November 11, 1816, a bitter and unhappy man at age 28. He had left England on April 24 in a cloud of controversy and scandal attending the breakup of his short-lived and unsatisfactory marriage. After sampling society in Brussels and Cologne, he visited in Switzerland with his friend Shelley, Mary Godwin (who later became Shelley's wife), and Mary's step-sister, Clara Mary Jane Clairmont (thereby refueling the fires of English gossip). Although obliging Clara's passion for him, Byron soon tired of her importunate adoration and left for Italy in October.

Immediately after installing himself and his attendants in an apartment in Venice, the young poet sought solace and diversion, finding both in congenial social life and in what became an over-lapping series of ardent love affairs, all well known to the more tolerant Venetians. Eager, too, for mental exercise to distract him from his painful memories, Byron, with characteristic vigor, plunged into the study of the Armenian language.

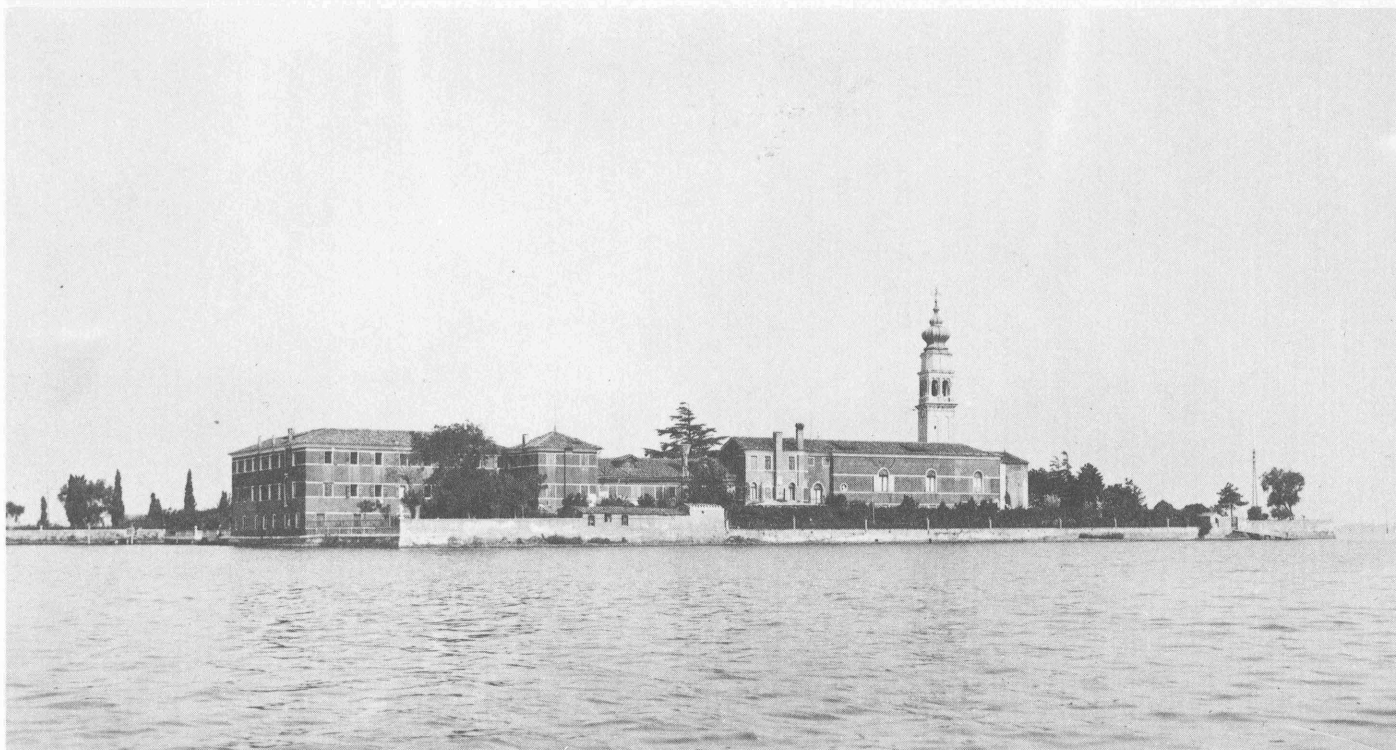
Byron's brief Armenian episode and his association with the Armenian monks of the Mekhitarist Order on the island of San Lazzaro near Venice may be traced in an unusually large collection of books on Byron, constituting an important segment of John S. Mayfield's library of more than 50,000 rare books and manuscripts, housed in the Syracuse University Library. The Mayfield collection includes several rare volumes relating specifically to this experience.

The Armenian monastery on the island of San Lazzaro was established in 1717 by the founder of the Catholic order, Abbot Peter Mekhitar. About fifteen monks now reside at the convent. The order operates a school, maintains a press, and preserves numerous treasured manuscripts and relics. With pride, the monks display the small room Lord Byron used as his study, directing particular attention to the book in which he entered his name for the first time as a visitor on November 27, 1816 and his autograph in Armenian characters.

Byron loved Venice. He wrote to his publisher, John Murray, on November 25, 1816, "Venice pleases me as much as I expected, and I expected much. It is one of those places which I know before I see them, and

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The Mechitarist Monastery of San Lazzaro, Venice. All photographs accompanying this article are reproduced by courtesy of the author.

has always haunted me the most after the East.”<sup>1</sup> Byron had made an extensive tour of Greece and Turkey in 1809 and 1810, and the impressions gained at that time were never forgotten.

Another letter to Murray on December 4 announced:

I wrote to you at some length last week; so that I have very little to add, except that I have begun, and am proceeding in, a study of the Armenian language, which I acquire, as well as I can, at the Armenian convent, where I go every day to take lessons of a learned Friar, and have gained some singular and not useless information with regard to the literature and customs of that oriental people. They have an establishment here – a church and convent of ninety monks, very learned and accomplished men, some of them. They have also a press, and make great efforts for the enlightening of their nation. I find the language (which is *twin*, the *literal* and the *vulgar*) difficult, but not invincible (at least I hope not). I shall go on. I found it necessary to twist my mind round some severer study; and this, as being the hardest I could devise here, will be a file for the serpent.<sup>2</sup>

The literal or classical form prevailed as the Armenian literary language until the vernacular, used in journalistic and popular writing, gradually displaced it during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The “learned Friar” who directed Byron’s study was Father Paschal Aucher, librarian of the convent. His translation of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* into Armenian contributed to the development of a classical movement in nineteenth-century Armenian literature. Father Aucher later recalled Byron as “a young man quick, sociable, with burning eyes.”

To his friend Thomas Moore, Byron wrote on December 5, “By way of divertisement, I am studying daily, at an Armenian monastery, the Armenian language. I found that my mind wanted something craggy to break upon. . . .”<sup>3</sup>

As the days passed, Byron became more and more enraptured with his lovely Marianna with the eyes of an antelope and with his Armenian studies. A letter dated December 17 to his friend Douglas Kinnaird and successive letters on December 18 and 19 to his half-sister, Augusta Leigh, mention his daily visits to the convent. Byron explained his enthusiasm to Augusta: “. . . if you ask me my reason for studying this out of the way language – I can only answer that it is Oriental and difficult, and employs me – which are

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<sup>1</sup> Rowland E. Prothero, ed., *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals*, revised edition, 6 vols. (London: John Murray, Albemarle Street; New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1901), 4:14.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 9

— as you know my Eastern and difficult way of thinking — reasons sufficient.”<sup>4</sup>

After only a few weeks of study, Byron was able to write to his friend, John Cam Hobhouse, on December 19:

My Armenian lectures still continue. I have about mastered thirty of the thirty-eight cursed scratches of Mesrob, the maker of alphabets,<sup>5</sup> and some words of one syllable. My lessons are in the Psalms — and Father Pasqual is a very attentive preceptor.

By way of requital for his instructions (as I could not offer sordid money to these friars), I have taken upon me the expenses of his Armenian and English grammar, which is now printing. It costs but a thousand francs to print five hundred copies, and being the first published in these joint languages, I think “I do the state some service. . . .”<sup>6</sup>

Byron also took on some editing chores. His letter of December 24 to Moore stated, “In the mornings I go over in my gondola to babble Armenian with the friars of the convent of St. Lazarus, and to help one of them in correcting the English of an English and Armenian grammar which he is publishing. . . .”<sup>7</sup>

He informed Murray in his letter of December 27:

I am going on with my Armenian studies in a morning, and assisting and stimulating in the English portion of an English and Armenian grammar, now publishing at the convent of St. Lazarus.

The Superior of the Friars is a bishop, and a fine old fellow, with the beard of a meteor. My spiritual preceptor, pastor and master, Father Paschal, is also a learned and pious soul: he was two years in England.<sup>8</sup>

Over the course of the next few weeks, Byron’s daily routine became familiar to the Venetians. Once he received an unsigned note offering to meet him either in gondola, or at the island of San Lazzaro, or at any other rendezvous. The lovely but fiery Marianna quickly put an end to this threat to her position as Byron’s favored mistress.

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<sup>4</sup>Peter Quennell, ed., *Byron, a Self Portrait: Letters and Diaries*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), 2:376.

<sup>5</sup>Although Armenia had a rich oral tradition, no written literature existed until St. Mesrob invented the alphabet early in the fifth century; the golden age of Armenian letters followed immediately. According to Armenian tradition, St. Mesrob also designed the characters for the Georgian and Albanian (ancient Alan) languages.

<sup>6</sup>John Murray, ed., *Lord Byron’s Correspondence: Chiefly with Lady Melbourne, Mr. Hobhouse, the Hon. Douglas Kinnaird, and P.B. Shelley*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1922), 2:26.

<sup>7</sup>Prothero, 4:26.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 36.

Byron soon became sufficiently adept to translate (probably during January-February, 1817) several passages from the classical Armenian into English, with perhaps more help from the kindly Father Aucher than has been acknowledged. The results of his diligence, *Lord Byron's Armenian Exercises and Poetry*, were published by the Mekhitarist press in 1870. A small-format volume (3¼" x 6"), the book contains 167 numbered pages, plus "Index" (contents) at the back. The Mayfield collection contains two copies of the first edition, one each in cloth and paper bindings.

For translation Lord Byron selected passages from the sixth-century Armenian historian, Moses of Chorene, a portion of "A Synodical Discourse by St. Nierses of Lampron," twelfth-century Armenian theologian and renowned orator, and two selections from the Armenian apocrypha, "The Epistle of the Corinthians to St. Paul the Apostle" and "Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians." The translations and portions of some of Byron's letters concerning his Armenian studies are printed in English and Armenian, on facing pages. The book also includes some of Byron's poems in Armenian translation only.

Evidently the grammar progressed rapidly, because Byron's letter to Murray of January 2, 1817 announced:

In another sheet, I send you some sheets of a grammar, English and Armenian for the use of the Armenians, of which I promoted, and indeed induced, the publication: (it cost me but a thousand francs – French livres). I still pursue my lessons in the language, without any rapid progress, but advancing a little daily. Padre Paschal, with some little help from me, as translator of his Italian into English, is also proceeding in an MS. Grammar of the *English* acquisition of Armenian, which will be printed also, when finished.

We want to know if there are any *Armenian types* or letterpress in England – at Oxford, Cambridge, or elsewhere? You know, I suppose, that, many years ago, the two Whistons published in England an original text of a history of Armenia, with their own Latin translation? Do those types still exist? and where? Pray enquire among your learned acquaintance.<sup>9</sup>

Prothero's footnote (p. 42) informs us of Murray's reply, dated January 22, 1817 (*Memoir of John Murray*, vol. i, p. 371): "I forgot to mention above that I have as yet ascertained only that there are no Armenian types at Cambridge." Prothero also cites *History of the Old English Letter Foundries* by Talbot Reed which states (p. 68): "In England the first Armenian types were those presented by Dr. Fell to Oxford in 1667. In the prolegomena of Walston's *Polyglot*, the alphabet there given had been cut in wood. In 1736 Caslon cut a neat Armenian (pica) for Whiston's edition of Moses

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 41.



Chorenensis; and these two were the only founts in England before 1820.” It is interesting to note that the first book to be printed in Armenian characters was produced in 1513 in Venice by Hagop, an Armenian printer.

Murray was a bookseller as well as a publisher, so Byron enterprisingly proposed:

When this grammar (I mean the one now printing) is done, will you have any objection to take 40 or fifty copies, which will not cost in all above five or ten guineas, and try the curiosity of the learned with a sale of them? Say yes or no, as you like. I can assure you that they have some very curious books and MS., chiefly translations from Greek originals now lost. They are, besides, a much respected and learned community, and the study of their language was taken up with great ardour by some literary Frenchmen in Buonaparte’s time.<sup>10</sup>

Byron was in no mood to write poetry when he first arrived in Venice. He wrote to Murray on January 2, 1817, “I have not done a stitch of poetry since I left Switzerland, and have not, at present, the *estro* upon me.”<sup>11</sup> But he must have resumed writing soon afterwards, because *Manfred*, started in Switzerland, was finished in January, composed – according to monastery tradition – under a grove of olive trees on San Lazzaro. A few months later, Byron started work on the fourth canto of *Childe Harold*, portions of which clearly reflect his impressions of this period in his life. The first part describes Venice – its ancient glories, history, present decay – and in the eighth stanza, Byron writes:

I’ve taught me other tongues – and in strange eyes  
Have made me not a stranger; to the mind  
Which is itself, no changes bring surprise; . . .

The Carnival, a series of celebrations prior to the Lenten season, started in early January, and from then until the middle of February, Byron abandoned his nights to parties, entertainments, and merrymaking, while continuing his daytime pursuits. By the cessation of the celebrations and the beginning of Lent, Byron was exhausted and ill. He wrote to Murray on March 3, 1817, “The Armenian Grammar is published; but my Armenian studies are suspended for the present, till my head aches a little less.”<sup>12</sup> Again to Murray on March 25, Byron wrote, “The Armenian Grammar is published – that is, *one*. The other is still in MS. My illness has prevented me from moving this month past, and I have done nothing more with the Armenians.”<sup>13</sup>

The grammar for the use of English students was issued two years later. Among Byron’s papers was a fragment apparently intended as a preface, but

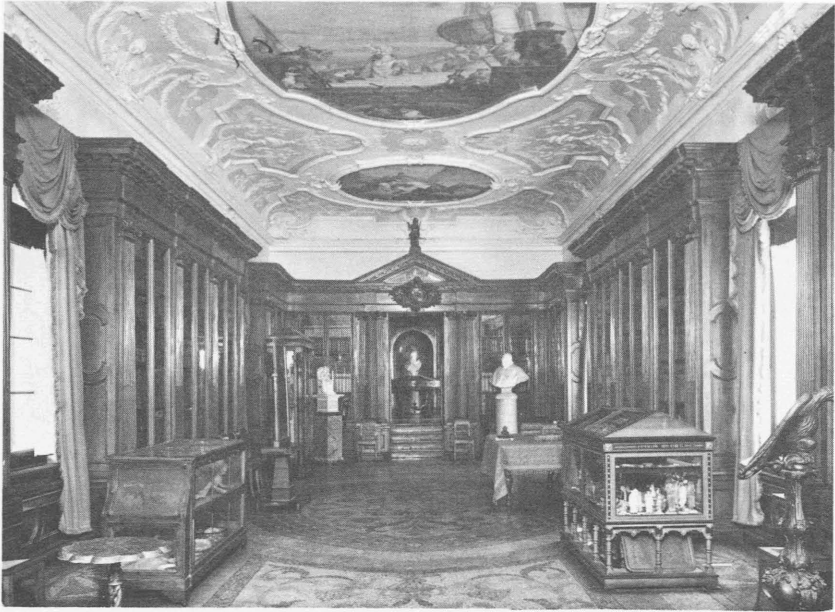
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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.



The Library of Manuscripts at San Lazzaro. The manuscripts date from the eighth century. The ceiling was painted by Tiepolo.



The Cloisters, San Lazzaro.

presumably not used because it contained an attack on the Turkish government. The monks maintained contact with the Armenian community in Turkey and one assumes that they were anxious not to antagonize Turkish officials, possibly fearing reprisals.

No preface nor mention of Byron's association with the publication of the book appears in an edition issued in 1832. The title page of the copy in the Mayfield collection identifies the book as "*A Grammar, Armenian and English* by P. Paschal Aucher, D.D., printed at the Armenian press of St. Lazarus, 1832." On the next right-hand leaf, under the heading "Advertisement," appears the following statement:

The Author having published in 1819 the first Edition of his Armenian Grammar for the use of English Students of that language, is encouraged to republish it in a more correct and complete form.

In the present Edition will be found some specimens of Armenian Poetry, and some translations of Lord Byron from the Armenian into English; and there are added, by way of exercise, Extracts from the best Armenian writers. Some of which are accompanied also with English translations.

Lord Byron's four translations may have appeared in print for the first time in this grammar. The book is clothbound, 4 3/8" x 7", with 230 numbered pages plus a one-page list of contents at the back.

As Byron waited for his fever to abate during that spring of 1817 in Venice, other concerns displaced his interest in the Armenian monks. He never resumed his Armenian studies, although his autobiographical tidbits called "Detached Thoughts," written during 1821-22, expressed regret over the opportunities he had lost to learn languages thoroughly. Travel, a complicated love life, and renewed writing activities drew his attention elsewhere. The monks did not forget him, however, and probably approached him for a letter of recommendation which he wrote, in uncharacteristically formal style, to Murray on June 8, 1817:

Dear Sir, — The present letter will be delivered to you by two Armenian friars, on their way, by England, to Madras. They will also convey some copies of the grammar, which I think you agreed to take. If you can be of any use to them, either amongst your naval or East Indian acquaintances, I hope you will so far oblige me, as they and their order have been remarkably attentive and friendly towards me since my arrival at Venice. Their names are Father Sukias Somalian and Father Sarkis Theodorosian. They speak Italian, and probably French, or a little English. Repeating earnestly my recommendatory request, believe me,

Very truly yours,  
Byron.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 131.

In a post script, Byron adds, "Perhaps you can help them to their passage, or give or get them letters for India," but provides no information as to their mission to India.

More than six months elapsed before the monks are mentioned again in Byron's correspondence. Another appeal to Murray, written from Venice on January 27, 1818, was also probably written on request of the monks, but this time shows a much lighter mood:

Dear Sir, — My father — that is, not God the Father, but my father in God, my Armenian father, Padre Pasquali — in the name of all the other fathers of our convent, sends you the inclosed greeting.

Inasmuch as it has pleased the translators of the long-lost and lately-found portions of the text of Eusebius to put forth the inclosed prospectus, of which I send six copies, you are hereby implored to obtain Subscribers in the two Universities, and among the learned, and the unlearned who would unlearn their ignorance. — This *they* (the Convent) request, *I* request, and *do you* request.<sup>15</sup>

The reason for Byron's gay tone appears later in the same letter: "It is the height of the Carnival, and I am in the *estrum* and agonies of a new intrigue. . . ."

The text to which Byron's letter refers is the Chronicle of Eusebius of Caesarea, of which some portions exist only in Armenian translation from the Greek original. Byron had once entertained thoughts of attempting the translation of this work himself. He was also intrigued by an ancient Armenian manuscript on the life of Alexander the Great which he found among the treasures of the convent library.

By this time, however, Byron was thoroughly absorbed in other matters. His active social and domestic life (even his old friends deplored his dissipations during this period), as well as his many but lesser known charities, demanded a constant and abundant supply of funds. A series of short and rather brusque letters to Murray during early spring of 1818 were almost entirely devoted to business.

An energetic letter writer himself, Byron was often irritated by Murray's delays in responding. His letter of April 11, 1818 complains, "Why have you not sent me an answer, and list of subscribers to the translation of the Armenian *Eusebius*? of which I sent you six copies of the printed prospectus (in French) two moons ago. Have you had the letter? — I shall send you another; — you must not neglect my Armenians."<sup>16</sup>

He wrote to Murray from Ravenna on March 28, 1820, "I wish to know

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 194.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 221.

what became of my two Epistles from St. Paul (translated from the Armenian three years ago and more) . . . ?”<sup>17</sup>

Writing again from Ravenna on October 9, 1821, he demanded testily, “The Epistle of St. Paul, which I translated from the Armenian – for what reason have you kept it back . . . ? Let me have a proof of that Epistle directly. . . .”<sup>18</sup>

Thereafter, Byron’s letters express no further interest in the monks and in his various Armenian projects, with the exception of one startling letter addressed to Richard Belgrave Hoppner, who had been British Consul in Venice since 1814. Writing from Genoa on February 27, 1823, Byron instructed:

My Dear Hoppner, – We must take what we can get; but you will tell Father Pasqual that he might have known that the value is triple what he proposed, and that I did not think him a dishonest man, when I printed at my own expence an Armenian Grammar in 1816 – to oblige his Confraternity. You will take the best price you can get (would an *auction* do?) and remit the amount on my account to Messrs. *Webb & Co.*, my bankers at Genoa, if possible, without expence save postage. . . . The whole Sum at present offered is 64 Sequins by the rogue of an Armenian.<sup>19</sup>

Byron was often generous, but his letters give ample evidence that he could also be exceedingly tough-minded on the subject of money. He haggled shamelessly with Murray over payment for his writings, argued with his lawyers and with merchants during business negotiations, and took close interest in the sale of his estate in England which he disposed of to ensure a secure income. His biting remarks in this letter, therefore, may be charged in part to his habitual sharp dealing and in part to his propensity for hyperbole. Although the exact circumstances are not clear, previous letters to Hoppner mention a supply of watches and telescopes which he had asked Hoppner to have appraised and to dispose of. In his letter of January 28, 1821, he described the watches as suitable only for the Levant market because of the numerals. It is possible that Father Pasqual’s unacceptable offer was for these materials.

During the few remaining months of his life, Byron probably gave little further thought to the brief interlude on the peaceful island of San Lazzaro. He now had a new cause – indeed, a mission – in the Greek independence movement which he supported with all of his money, influence, and vitality until his death at Missolonghi in 1824.

The Armenian monks never forgot him, however. As the years passed, the ranks of the British curiosity-seekers who once traveled to Venice hoping

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 425.

<sup>18</sup> Prothero, 5:391.

<sup>19</sup> Prothero, 6:168.

to catch a glimpse of the notorious and dissolute poet were increased by visitors and tourists from all over the world. To answer their many questions, the monastery produced numerous books, leaflets, and pamphlets in English and various European languages. Two early pieces of this nature are in the Mayfield collection.

*Lord Byron and Father Paschal Aucher, His Teacher of the Armenian Language* (Venice, 1862), 5" x 7 1/4", clothbound, contains only two pages of text and the portraits of Byron and his tutor.

*The Island of San Lazzaro or The Armenian Monastery Near Venice* by Rd. Dr. J. Issaverdenz (Venice, 1879), 4 3/4" x 6 7/8", clothbound, contains 30 pages and is illustrated. A section describes Byron's Armenian study. The copy in the Mayfield collection has blank interleaves.<sup>20</sup>

A copy of one of many Armenian editions of Byron's poetry is also in the Mayfield collection. *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage: Italy* (Third edition, Venice, 1889), 4 1/4" x 6 3/4", paperbound, contains 147 pages. The poem appears in English and Armenian, on facing pages. An introduction of three pages, in (classical) Armenian only, explains that the fourth canto has been translated because it is about Italy and because one section sings of Venice where Byron, a pilgrim, studied Armenian and wrote a part of this poem.

The translator, not identified in the book, was Father Leon Alishan, one of the most distinguished poets and scholars of the Mekhitarist Order and a leader in the romantic movement in Armenian literature. Father Alishan had traveled to England in 1852. Business affairs kept him there for some time and he seized the opportunity to improve his knowledge of English. After translating some of Byron's lyric poems into classical Armenian, he proceeded with the fourth canto. It first appeared in print in 1860 and a second edition was issued in 1872.

Several other noted Armenian poets have translated Byron's poems into Armenian. Widely read in the vernacular, Byron's romantic and lyric poetry had a strong influence on Armenian writers of the late nineteenth century and early years of the twentieth century. Driven from their homes by persecution and oppression, perhaps the Armenian people understood the expatriate Byron in a way that his own people could not. His memory remains fresh on the island of San Lazzaro near his beloved Venice.

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<sup>20</sup> A paperbound copy in my personal library bears the 1879 date on its cover, but is dated 1890 on the title page. It does not have blank interleaves.