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Autobiography & Memoir

Lord Byron's Jackal: A Life of Edward John Trelawny
David Crane
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When the subject of this biography died in 1881, his cremated remains were buried in Rome alongside one of English Romanticism's most revered poets, Percy Bysshe Shelley. It was a final public relations coup for Trelawny, who had devoted his entire adult life to cultivating celebrityhood based on his writings, travels, war exploits and, above all, his friendship with Shelley, Lord Byron and other members of their Pisan circle of intellectuals and political activists. In this meticulously researched and engagingly written account, Crane describes Trelawny as one of his generation's most gifted storytellers and prose writers. Yet his abilities and accomplishments are not just marred, but totally overshadowed by a dishonesty so breathtakingly complete that of necessity it becomes the central theme of the narrative.

Poorly educated and possibly abused by a father he detested, Trelawny joined the Navy in his early teens. The Battle of Trafalgar became a seminal event in his life—not because he fought in it, but because his ship missed out on the action. From then on, Trelawny would become something of a nineteenth century version of Forrest Gump, popping up at the side of famous personages or in the middle of great events—whether literally or in fabricated scenes he would scatter throughout a series of self-serving autobiographies.

What is true enough is that in the early 1820s he drifted to Italy and wormed his way into the society of Byron and Shelley with a mixture of charm, good looks and prowess at boxing and sailing. It was he who ordered the sailboat that carried Shelley to his death in a fierce Mediterranean storm and who helped cremate the body. Eventually, Trelawny and Byron joined a ragtag collection of Philhellene expatriates who aided the cause of Greek independence from the Ottoman Turks.

Byron would sicken and die in Greece, while Trelawny, always the survivor, attached himself to warlord Odysseus Androutses. They and a group of followers took refuge in a fortress cave in the face of Mount Parnassus, where Trelawny would marry a child bride and narrowly

survive an assassination attempt by fellow Philhellenes who considered him a traitor. Again he escaped, returning to England to publish his first autobiographical work, which—despite its many deceptions—produced the fame he so craved. For another half-century he would live on, author, adventurer and authority on the lives of Byron and Shelley, two giants in whose shadow Trelawny would forever linger.

Crane draws upon a rich variety of sources in this, his first book; particularly illuminating is Trelawny's voluminous correspondence with intimates such as Mary Shelley and Byron's lover Claire Clairmont. The text is enhanced by portraits and photographs of important people and places, including the entrance of the mysterious cave at Parnassus. Lord Byron's Jackal is essential reading for any student of Byron, Shelley and early Romanticism, and a fascinating tale of one man's ruthless quest to make a name for himself.

John Flesher