

## WANDERING DOWN BYWAYS

### JOHN BYROM (1691-1763)



A different kind of intellectual and a different kind of Protestant from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is her contemporary John Byrom, an amiable Jacobite and a minor (occasionally good) poet. Byrom is a friend of William Law and an acquaintance of John and Charles Wesley. Precluded from his preferred career as an academic by his conscientious objection to the oaths of allegiance to the new royal house of Hanover, he makes his major activity the teaching of his own method of shorthand. This skill is

of great value before the invention of recording devices.

How seriously Byrom regards his invention appears in a letter he writes in middle age:

It is not quite right that thy father having invented the best thing of this kind, thou shouldst only be a stander by whilst others exert the use of it. I have a greater desire, and with greater reason, for the preservation of a thing that may be useful to posterity, that my only son, whom I love most entirely, may be able, if he be willing, to transmit the invention down to future times.

However, his need to recruit students beyond his home city of Manchester condemns him to long periods of absence from his beloved wife and children. Happily, he finds some compensation for this in conviviality at coffee houses and taverns. In one letter to his wife, he reminds her, "I love good company."

Byrom, however, is much more than a boon companion. Early and late, he is a serious Christian, but his religion is very different from the largely political churchmanship of Swift and the easygoing if informed and intelligent creed of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu. He seizes happily on

the work of the philosopher-priest Nicolas Malebranche (1638-1715), who finds a way to live with Descartes's teaching that matter and spirit are completely separate and do not interact. This teaching seems to distance God and grant Him only the status of a remote First Cause, but Malebranche's Occasionalism posits that it is God's intervention that makes contact between our sense organs and material objects produce images in our minds. This reassurance that the Creator is everywhere active in His world so pleases Byrom that in 1727 he can write to his wife, "My dear, I have made a purchase – what d'ye think it is? – Father Malebranche's picture."

An enthusiast for the work of Malebranche is William Law. Like John and Charles Wesley, and unlike many eighteenth century clergy and lay people, Law is convinced that biblical morality is not nearly enough to make a person a Christian and that inner experience of the Spirit is of the essence of religion. The brothers Wesley respect Law until he dares to wrestle honestly, with the help of the abstruse writings of the mystic Jakob Boehme, with the Problem of Evil, the question of how a world full of pain and suffering can be the work of a good Creator. Law concludes that all suffering comes from the rebellion of the fallen angels and the sin of Adam and that there is no wrath at all in God Himself. John Wesley protests that this leaves no room for the reconciliation of transgressing man through Christ. In 1739, Byrom gives a message for his brother-in-law to his son:

tell him that Mr. Charles Wesley is in London but that I very seldom see him, not being quite agreed in all our opinions ... his brother has been preaching at Bath and thereabouts as I was told. They have both together printed a book of hymns... They have introduced them by a preface against what they call mystic writers (not naming any particular author), for whom they had once a great veneration.

Eighteen years later, when John Wesley has published an open attack on Law's teachings, Byrom maintains that only Law, who "shows that nature unbeautified by the God of love is and must be a state of torment and disquiet," has provided an effective answer to a Deist argument against Christianity.

In Byrom, there is a delicate balance between, on the one hand, the man who tells his friend Leycester that "True Religion, Ralph, is the plainest thing in the world" and another correspondent that Christians should live their faith, not argue about it, and, on the other hand, the follower of Nicolas Malebranche and William Law. The cautious element in him predominates when, in 1736, he writes a series of letters to the twenty-one-year-old Fanny Henshaw, gently warning her against following the promptings of spiri-

tual visitations driving her towards Quakerism, a creed, he remarks in his personal journal, that dispenses with baptism and the Lord's Prayer. In firmer language, he asks William Law to disabuse the "bequakered" and "infatuated" woman. Law thinks that her visitations are not to be trusted but fails to prevent her conversion.

Along with many passages devoted to shorthand and religion, Byrom's letters contain some lively accounts of his experiences and observations. His family and his friend John Stansfield are given glimpses of his undergraduate life at Cambridge, where he glories in the prospect of becoming a Bachelor of Arts: "how great it sounds! the Great Mogul is nothing to it." His wife is probably entertained as well as alarmed by his account of an incident on his journey from London to Cambridge in January 1728:

for about half a mile or less of Epping, a highwayman in a red rug upon a black horse came out of the bushes up to the coach, and presenting a pistol, first at the coachman and then at the corporation within, with a volley of oaths demanded our money ... one of the gentlemen who rode backwards flung a guinea into his hat; Mr. Collier, who sat backwards over against me, threw another.... It happened that Mr. Collier's guinea fell upon the road, upon which he made the coachman light and take it him up, and then came round to the other side, from whence he rid into the wood without calling for any second payments.

In 1742, welcoming the Act of Parliament that grants him exclusive rights for twenty-one years to his method of shorthand, he tells his sister of the obstacles he had to overcome for the Act to pass.

Four years later, after the Young Pretender, in the course of his thwarted attempt to reclaim his grandfather's throne for the House of Stuart, has passed through Manchester with his Highland army, Byrom treats his Quaker friend William Vigor to an account of their three-day occupation. After referring to the way "a great many" of his fellow citizens left Manchester and "sent away their effects" on the approach of the Highlanders, he observes that the Prince "rode through the streets the day after his coming, and to do justice to his person, whatever his pretensions may be, he makes a very graceful and amiable appearance" and that "the ladies, smitten with the charms of the young gentlemen, say that he takes after his mother." As the defeated invaders reappeared in Manchester on their way back to Scotland, "the foolish mob clodded them with dirt or stones" and "The good folks who deserted the town upon their return home grew rather too valiant when the enemy was gone, and too angry at their neighbours who stayed." Although Byrom, for all his Jacobite sym-

pathy, keeps out of danger himself, he indirectly brings his student Lord Moreton into peril. French officials, mistaking the shorthand in his possession for ciphers, give Moreton and his family a spell in the Bastille. During their confinement, Lady Moreton and his sister “were not used so well as might be expected from French politeness and English quality.”

Despite the very considerable interest of his correspondence, Byrom is not in the front rank of letter-writers. When he describes the passage of his Act through Parliament, he fails to follow the chronological order necessary to recreate the suspense involved. His scenes can be vivid—his account of the aftermath of a fire in London that destroys perhaps a hundred houses is sufficiently horrifying—but he does not paint characters with the skill and delight of a Dorothy Osborne or discuss ideas with the trenchancy of a Swift.