

Lord Byron, “Inscription on the Monument of a Newfoundland Dog”

The English poet George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824) is one of the major figures of the British Romantic period (1780-1830). A vastly popular poet in his time, Byron was also notorious for scandalous behavior, and was also known for his great fondness for animals; throughout his life he kept a menagerie of various creatures. One of his favorites was his first Newfoundland dog, Boatswain, acquired when Byron was 15; Boatswain died of rabies 5 years later, with Byron famously nursing his dog through that illness without fear of being bitten. (Boatswain is typically pronounced “boh – zun,” and is often written “Bo’s’n” or “Bos’n.” A boatswain [literally “boat –lover”] is a ship’s officer in charge of sails and rigging, and who oversees crew duties. Presumably Byron chose the name to reflect the fact Newfoundlands were, even in the early 19th Century, famous for being water-rescue dogs.) “Newstead” in line 12 is Newstead Abbey, Byron’s ancestral home, where Boatswain was buried under an elaborate monument; the tomb was built with space for Byron’s coffin when he should die, but Byron, who died in Greece and had sold Newstead Abbey in 1818 to help pay debts, was in fact buried in the family vault in nearby St. Mary Magdalene Church.

The first twelve lines of this work are now believed by most scholars to have been written not by Byron but by his close friend John Cam Hobhouse; the rest of the work is Byron’s.

Near this spot
are deposited the Remains of one
who possessed Beauty without Vanity,
Strength without Insolence,
Courage without Ferocity,
and all the Virtues of Man without his Vices.
This praise, which would be unmeaning Flattery
if inscribed over human Ashes,
is but a just tribute to the Memory of
BOATSWAIN, a DOG
Who was born in Newfoundland May 1803
And died at Newstead Nov 18th, 1808.

When some proud son of man¹ returns to earth,
Unknown to glory, but upheld by birth,^o
The sculptor’s art exhausts the pomp of woe,
And storied urns² record who rest below:
When all is done, upon the tomb is seen,
Not what he was, but what he should have been:
But the poor dog, in life the firmest friend,
The first to welcome, foremost to defend,
Whose honest heart is still his master’s own,
Who labours, fights, lives, breathes for him alone,
Unhonour’d falls, unnoticed all his worth,
Denied in heaven the soul he held on earth:
While man, vain insect! hopes to be forgiven,
And claims himself a sole exclusive heaven.
Oh man! thou feeble tenant of an hour,

^o i.e., a nobleman important by lineage, not deeds

¹ “Son of man” occurs a number of times in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, as well as in other religious traditions. Generally the term refers to all humankind; in the Gospels, the phrase is used most often by Jesus, often in reference to himself but sometimes more generally. There are many competing interpretations of this phrase in Christian tradition. Byron, quite sceptical about Christianity, is using the term in the first sense above, and somewhat ironically, as an example of the inflated pomposity with which some nobles regard themselves.

² An allusion to Thomas Gray’s wildly famous (in the 18th Century, at least) poem “Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard” (1751) – a poem which, appropriately, celebrates ordinary, not aristocratic, lives.

Debased by slavery, or corrupt by power,
Who knows thee well must quit thee with disgust,
Degraded mass of animated dust!
Thy love is lust, thy friendship all a cheat,
Thy smiles hypocrisy, thy words deceit!
By nature vile, ennobled but by name,
Each kindred brute might bid thee blush for shame.
Ye! who perchance behold this simple urn,
Pass on — it honours none you wish to mourn:
To mark a friend's remains these stones arise;
I never knew but one, — and here he lies.

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