

LORD BYRON, GEORGE WATT AND THE ABERDEEN GRAMMAR SCHOOL

By some distance the most famous former pupil of Aberdeen Grammar School is George Byron Gordon who in 1798, aged 10, inherited a baronetcy and became Lord Byron. When the headmaster invited him into his study for cake and wine, it was an early sign that his life was going to change.

On 14th September 1923 the statue of Lord Byron which stands in front of the current school buildings (opened in 1863, seventy-five years after Byron left the old school in Schoolhill) was unveiled for the first time.



It had taken over two decades for the idea of a statue to get to this point for, then as now, Byron was a controversial figure, with a litany of bad behaviour to set against his achievements and it was only by a vote of 8 to 7 that the School Board decided to go ahead. Morland Simpson, Rector of the School from 1893-1920, was staunchly in favour but did not live to see his plan realised.

Exactly one hundred years after the unveiling, a small ceremony was held in front of the statue to mark its centenary, the brainchild of Callum Stuart, a former teacher at the School who imagined, coordinated and hosted the event. As an investigative local historian he had researched the story of the statue, discovering in the process that

immediately after the unveiling a wreath had been laid on behalf of the School by ten year old George Theodore Robertson Watt. In tracing George Watt's surviving relatives so that they could be present at the ceremony Callum uncovered an untold story of remarkable coincidence and poignancy.



From left to right, Iain Hopkin, Ex-Editor of the AGS FP Magazine; Nuala Watt, George Watt's great niece; Graham Watt, George Watt's nephew; Carolyn Davies (nee Gray), Hector Gray's daughter; Duncan Eddie, Minister of Fountainhall Church; Neil Lawrie, President of the AGS FP Club; Callum Stuart, former AGS teacher and host of the event.

Lord Byron

Byron's poetry, his life and scandals are well known and there are many sources from which to learn the details. When the statue was unveiled, however, the assembled company were in no doubt as to where the balance lay, Byron's achievements outshining his faults, as a champion of freedom and justice, "Europe's Public Orator". second only to Napoleon in terms of European fame, his poems translated into every major European language, and finally, leaving his libertine days behind, supporting and dying for the cause of Greek Independence from the Ottoman Empire. It is said he might have become the first King of Greece, had he survived, as an outsider acceptable to competing parties. On a school trip to Greece in 1965, it did us no harm to let slip that we came from Byron's school.

A recent biographer of the poet John Keats contrasted the working-class origins of her subject with the privileged and aristocratic backgrounds of Percy Shelley and Lord Byron. That Byron spent his first ten years in Aberdeen, in his words, "*born half a Scot but bred a whole one,*" had escaped her notice. But these years were important, and formative in many ways.

Byron didn't just have one emotionally unstable parent – he had two, Catherine Gordon and "Mad Jack" Byron – an explanation perhaps for his restlessness, impetuous outbursts and inconstancy. However, there was more to him than that. Sir Walter Scott, not the most obvious of supporters, wrote several times of Byron's generosity, his loyalty to friends and dependents and other fine qualities.

He was born with a deformed right foot, resulting in a sliding gait and limp, with little improvement from wearing painful wooden splints. Byron resented his disability and did not like it being mentioned. Then and now, attending a mainstream school with a disability is tough, and often a prescription for social isolation, ridicule and even cruelty from peers. As the only child of an impoverished single parent living in the Broad Street, there was nothing special about him at that time. Byron found solace and company in reading. He read voraciously in his Aberdeen years, laying foundations for the mastery and facility with language that he was to display in years to come.

In 1798, after a fortuitous sequence of family deaths, he was catapulted into English society as a Lord. Even by today's low standards of ennoblement that was social mobility on a gigantic, exhilarating scale. Byron revelled in the position, means and opportunities that his new status provided. People who would have looked down on him now looked up. But he remained an outsider, a thorn in the side of convention and the Regency establishment, perhaps one of the reasons why his poems were so popular. Byron sold more books in an afternoon than Keats and Shelley sold in their lifetimes.

The unveiling ceremony

On the 14th of September 1923, in a ceremony which began with speeches in the old school hall in front of subscribers, school staff, senior pupils and former pupils, the company moved outside for the unveiling of the statue. Designed by the King's Sculptor, James Pittendrigh-Macgillivray, the bronze statue stands on a pedestal of granite from the Inver quarry, halfway between Crathie and Braemar.

On behalf of the school a wreath was laid by pupil George Theodore Robertson Watt, with an inscription from the French literary critic Sainte-Bauve, "*There are only three great poets – Byron, Milton and Pindar*" – an epithet that was outdated even then (Sainte-Bauve was writing before 1850) and is certainly outdated now.

George Watt was ten years old, the eldest son of Theodore Watt, Secretary and Treasurer of the AGS FP Club for 27 years, Editor of its magazine for 39 years and the first of three generations of Presidents of the Club, followed by his son Alan C R Watt (1975-76) and grandson Nigel G M Watt (2012-13).



George Watt in a 1923 class photo, standing in the centre of the back row

George attended the school from 1918 to 1931, was active in the school's 9th cub pack and scout troop, and a prefect in his final year. Three brothers and a cousin were fellow pupils, two of them Senior Prefects.



George Watt as a member of the 9th Aberdeen Cub Pack and as an older pupil of Aberdeen Grammar School

George Gordon and George Watt had something else in common. Aged 11 in 1924, George climbed Lochnagar with 4 family members and over a hundred others for the unveiling of the Cairngorm Club indicator. Aged 15 in 1803, Byron also climbed Lochnagar, with lots of stops, while re-visiting the North-East and staying at Invercauld. Years later he would write a poem about “*Dark Lochnagar*” and remember the mountain while overlooking the plains of Troy. For George it was the beginning of a passion for climbing the Cairngorms and Scottish hills, enjoying the freedom of “tramping the heather”.

George studied medicine at Aberdeen University, graduated in 1936, and moved to work as an assistant in general practice at Inch in Aberdeenshire. After a house job at the Aberdeen Maternity Hospital under Professor Sir Dugald Baird, he moved to hospital jobs in London and Sheffield to pursue a career in obstetrics and gynaecology. His references describe a doctor who was careful, conscientious, calm and reliable in an emergency, popular with colleagues, loyal to his seniors, tactful with patients, and showing sound clinical judgment allied to good common sense. He had a promising career ahead.

George’s school friend and frequent hillwalking companion Hector Gray (1917-29) recalled relaxing on a brae above Loch Ewe in Wester Ross in the late 1930s. War was imminent. They discussed what they would do when the war was over.

“*Meet you here, if you like*” was George’s suggestion, and as Hector wrote later, “*The tryst was made*”. But it was not to be.

When war broke out, George joined the navy and was posted as a Surgeon-Lieutenant serving on HMS Wryneck, a destroyer operating out of Alexandria in Egypt, with many voyages transferring troops across the Eastern Mediterranean.



Surgeon-Lieutenant George Watt

On 27th April 1941, HMS Wryneck was attacked and sunk by German bombers, while evacuating British troops from mainland Greece. Survivors on rafts were strafed by machine gun. An eye-witness told George's parents that he had died instantly in the ship's medical station. His resting place is a war grave in the Aegean Sea, midway between Greece and Crete. He was 28.

George was one of 194 Aberdeen Grammar School former pupils who died in active service in World War 2. Their average age was 27. Ninety-two were aged under 25. Most were single men. There were nine sets of brothers. In the School's Roll of Honour, they are not just names or statistics but individuals with photographs and pen portraits of lives cut short.

On 14th September 2023, George Watt's nephew Graham Watt, Emeritus Professor of General Practice at the University of Glasgow (and brother of Nigel Watt), and great niece Nuala Watt, one of Scotland's leading young poets, laid a wreath and photograph at the foot of the Byron statue.



Both Byron and George Watt had died fighting for freedom in Greece. The statue is a reminder, therefore, not only of Byron's fame as a poet but also the sacrifice made by him and by others. The inscription with the wreath read,

*"In memory of those who gave their lives fighting the cause of freedom
in countries other than their own".*

Following the laying of the wreath, Nuala Watt (like Byron, "a disabled poet obsessed with books in her school years") read a short poem

So, we'll go no more a roving

So, we'll go no more a roving
So late into the night,
Though the heart be still as loving,
And the moon be still as bright.

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.

Though the night was made for loving,
And the day returns too soon,
Yet we'll go no more a roving
By the light of the moon.

Lord George Gordon Byron (1788-1824)

See also the Press & Journal coverage at

<https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/past-times/6141094/aberdeen-grammar-school-marks-100-years-of-lord-byron-statue/>

Graham Watt
MD FRCGP FMedSci FRSE CBE