DARK AND STORMY WATERS
Into The Drink With Lord Byron, Again
By Richard Taylor
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(Illustrations by Paul Leli)

"The best sort of travel always involves a degree of trespass. The risk is both a challenge and an invitation." - Paul Theroux.

When I flew to England for a bit of outdoor swimming with eccentrics, both living and dead, my friend Rosemary suggested I sign up for an adventure triathlon in Scotland to swim with the Loch Ness Monster. I was tempted, but triathlons are not Byronic enough; I was interested in more literary aquatic feats. Already I'd jumped the wall of Dylan Thomas's writing shed in Wales, swimming the tidal estuary to a medieval castle. From the shores of St. Ives Cornwall I swam in the scrotum-clutching Atlantic to the Godrevy Lighthouse that had inspired Virginia Woolf's *To The Lighthouse*. In Sussex, with an actor and his lovely friend I swam a spooky mile of the River Ouse where Virginia Woolf committed suicide. But the scariest and most outrageous swim I was saving for the last.

I planned to take a dip in the river Thames where Lord Byron had swum two hundred years earlier. Writing a letter from London on August 11, 1807,

Byron casually mentioned to a lady friend: " Last week I swam in the Thames from Lambeth through the two bridges, Westminster and Blackfriars, a distance, including the different turns and tacks made on the way, of three miles."

For a couple of hundred years people have been appropriating the Byronic style while bad mouthing the man. In typical Byronic fashion, he'd swum the Thames for a wager - yet another display of vanity and hubris, though the man did live for the water and prided himself as being almost amphibious. Byron once quipped, "Who would write, who had anything better to do?" Like a jack-in-the-box, his blueblood ass sprang out of its writer's chair as often as possible so he could pursue romantic entanglements, hike, duel, travel, soldier and swim everywhere. Because he had been born with the deformity of a clubfoot, Byron was always trying to prove himself. Swimming allowed him the physical grace and freedom he never had out of water. He coped with depression, writer's block and wanderlust by swimming moats, canals, ponds, lakes, rivers and the sea in Scotland, Venice and Portugal. His dip in the Thames had been a warm up for his famous Hellespont swim in the narrow strait between Europe and Asia near Troy. Here treacherous waters flow down from the Black Sea, sweeping any swimmer miles downstream and out into the open waters of the Aegean. In Hero and Leander, an ancient myth retold by Christopher Marlowe, young Leander swims the Hellespont nightly to visit Hero, a priestess of the goddess Venus. One night in a storm he drowns making the attempt. Leander swam for love, while Byron swam to graft the classical myth onto his own personal legend.

Through a friend of my wonderfully unhinged brother-in-law Vic's, I found myself ensconced in a million-pound luxury apartment at St. George's Wharf that hung right over the Thames. Out on the balcony I drank a glass of Thames tap water, while Vic sipped his expensive Scotch so we could enjoy a moody sunset reverie with all of London spread out before us. While night swimming Byron probably came up with the opening line of his most famous poem: "She walks in beauty, like the night." On a literary ramble Vic and I had discovered most of Charles Dickens's novels are haunted by the Thames. Pip and the convict from *Great Expectations* quite literally emerge from the mud of the river. The evil Quilp from *The Old Curiosity Shop* drowns in the Thames. *Our Mutual Friend* begins with people rowing around the Thames at night salvaging dead bodies to remove what they can for profit.

Described as a sludgy mass of cholera-breeding filth and stench, on many occasions Dickens accompanied the Thames River Police on moonlit nights

for research: “The river had an awful look, the buildings on the banks were muffled in black shrouds, and the reflected lights seemed to originate deep in the water, as if the spectres of suicides were holding them to show where they went down.” From the edge of our balcony, Vic looked down at the murky river churning below and said, “You crazy bastard, Ricky - I can’t believe you’re going to swim in that.”

Other writers had swum the Thames. In an autobiography, Benjamin Franklin wrote about his first visit to London in 1726: “I stripped and leaped into the river, and swam from near Chelsea to Blackfryar’s, performing on the way many feats of activity, both upon and under the water, that surpris’d and pleas’d those to whom they were novelties.” Franklin’s swim was a half-mile longer and eighty-one years earlier than Byron’s more celebrated swim. A seventeenth- and eighteenth-century swimmer in London was a rare spectacle, but not as rare as a Canadian swimming the Thames in 2007.

Unlike free spirited Byron who died young, straight-laced Franklin lived to the age of eighty-four. When Franklin was only a teenager he invented swimming fins, and later on, bifocals, the odometer, Franklin fireplace, the lightning rod, and during eight transatlantic voyages, instead of ogling corsetted women in long turtleneck dresses, Franklin systematically charted the Gulf Stream. Towards the end of his life, in 1776 he even got in on the signing of the American Declaration of Independence.

As I looked out over the railing I knew who’d be more interesting to swim with between Byron and Franklin, but I was more concerned by the fact that the Thames rises and falls with a twenty-four-foot tide, insanely flowing at one-to-three knots. I’ve swum in unusual places all over the world, but since I’d been contemplating a baptism in the Thames, I had never seen a less inviting body of water.

Recently the Thames had been visited by a piranha, seals, whales, sea horses and dolphins. In July 2006, a ballsy lawyer, Lewis Gordon Pugh, swam the entire 215-mile length from the Cotswolds to the North Sea. After he stroked into London to offer the Prime Minister a letter asking him to take global warning seriously, he admitted his least favourite part of the swim had been downtown London.

Next morning I stood near the water. Although I had seen NO SWIMMING signs along the high walls of the Thames, the best place for me to get in was right beside our apartment near Vauxhall Bridge. High above the tidal scour

of the bridge footings, a series of bronze female figures commemorate the Arts. Byron would have approved. Low tide revealed stinky mudflats, and a plaque: “This site has been worshipped, feared, respected, worked, abused, traversed, ignored, restored and enjoyed. London’s first ever bridge stood on this site over 3,000 years ago.” Thanks to a massive cleanup in the last thirty years, the river is touted as an environmental success story, and the water is probably cleaner than it was in Byron’s day when London had around a million people. Towards the end of the 20th century after hundreds of years of sewage, industrial discharge and pollution from power stations, the Thames was declared by scientists to be biologically dead: “No animal life could survive in any measurable way in waters so bereft of oxygen.“ Now, London is pushing eight million, yet the river is called the cleanest metropolitan estuary in Europe.

The nasty dung-coloured water wasn’t pollution or filth – it was natural sediment from the estuary that gets washed to and fro by the powerful daily tides filled with more than 115 species of fish. Still, it wasn’t exactly teeming with swimmers. Not one.

I walked beyond Vauxhall Bridge to the London Duck Tours ramp that was the only break in the sea wall. The Ducks were amphibious vehicles remodelled from D-Day landing craft. I passed MI6, Britain’s Secret Intelligence Service, which is one of the world’s most secure buildings and the fictional home of James Bond. The upper part looks like a battleship fortress, and a bunker below ground protects it from terrorist attacks. Yet in a black Speedo, James Bond-style, I planned to swim from this headquarters with its bombproof and bulletproof glass and walls, security cameras and satellite dishes that monitor foreign nations across the world.

It was almost too easy. I simply walked down the boat ramp to the water. In the middle of London, I stood alone at low tide on a glorious beach, complete with driftwood, shells, and the smell of the sea.

I’d decided against pulling on my Orca wetsuit because it might be construed as espionage apparel, and I’d be shot or fished out of the Thames as a suspected Terrorist or an aquatic wacko. And it wasn’t as if I could go to various authorities in London to ask permission: “Ah, I’ve always had this wild-ass desire to swim with Lord Byron.” Authority figure: “Are you fooking daft?’

I removed my shoes, socks and pants, then stashed them in my backpack. But I kept a T- shirt on that just covered my black Speedo. At low tide the wet sand and mud slime was cold as I did a dead man walking into the ooze, and I actually stood in the Thames.

The London terrorist bombings had only been two summers earlier. Security had tightened. There was still a whiff of paranoia in the air. I'd be arrested, scorned, and become the butt of jokes for years to come if I got caught following in the wake of Byron. I wasn't doing it to get on the news, or for charity, though in the past I'd been sponsored to swim for good causes like the Arthritis Society and the Heart and Stroke Foundation. In the spirit of Henry David Thoreau's civil disobedience, Franklin's bravado and Byron's yearning desire, I was doing a non-standard swim to confound all the annoying dickwads who'd ever pooh-poohed me or my ilk. And for old fashioned, mischievous joy and fun.

People say the tide sucks you down and you drown in mud. There was something primeval about this mud. I could disappear. Every year they pulled about fifty bodies from the Thames. I looked out over the rushing river and wondered, God knows what else is under that water. If you flipped London over and drained the Thames, there'd be a whole other city.

Suddenly behind me there was a terrifying roar.

I turned to see the oblong yellow London Duck tour boat stuffed with hysterical tourists. It clattered down the steel ramp, whooshed by me, and splashed into the Thames. Bobbing dangerously, it then accelerated away with its occupants, who turned to stare at me standing meekly in the water.

Then, as if I wasn't already paranoid enough, from the other direction, a blue-hulled police boat bore down on me.

Shit.

I hurried over and pulled my pants back on and grabbed my pen and notebook to pretend I had a good reason to be skulking around low tide. Maybe they thought I was going to walk into the river to do myself in like Virginia Woolf. But I had no intention of creating an International incident.

The Police launch swerved in close to shore and motored towards me as I continued recording an archaeologist's dream: horseshoe, nasty yellow latex

glove, its bloated fingers half filled with brown water, old square nails, pieces of ancient glass, broken watch, wonky sunglasses, caved-in tennis ball whose fur had partially rubbed off during its epic voyage, plastic water bottles, flattened umbrella, smooth bricks, bent spoon, and a submerged cowboy boot a long way from home. I intoned my mantra: “The cleanest metropolitan river in Europe. “

The police boat circled back under Vauxhall Bridge to make sure I was all right. Then it continued upriver in the opposite direction of my intended swim. So I removed my pants and shirt, stuffed them with my notebook and pen into the backpack, and hid it again among driftwood.

I slipped down mud slime into water, then lunged forward, hyperventilating into each breath of breaststroke. It was cold, and my stomach wanted to heave. Even from this far upriver, I felt the pull of the North Sea. The whole muscle and lifeblood of Empire flowed in these waters. It tasted brackish, a mix of fresh water and salt, which was a relief because I’d worried it might taste of warm saliva, like the Ganges when half of India converges for a spiritual pilgrimage. My squeamishness was all psychological, the result of too much research. But it was real. Instead of being hung from gallows, pirates were placed in iron cages and submerged in the river for three tides. A nineteenth-century cartoon captioned “Monster Soup” revealed a broth of unspeakable creatures in the Thames.

I’d read too much about what’s now flushed down toilets by 8 million people: oil, paint, tampons, needles, bandages, razor blades, condoms, cocaine, heroin and ecstasy. Just thinking about the cycle of all the stuff entering mouths, veins, noses and sex organs, then leaving bodies, flushed into the sewer plants and overflowing into the Thames and splashing into my mouth as I swim, and then tilted into millions of mouths from glasses of Thames tap water, makes one ponder. Surely the inoculations I’d received for diphtheria, hepatitis A and B, and tetanus would help me endure various illnesses and afflictions in Shakespeare’s second favourite river - including Weil’s disease, which can be passed on through bacteria in rat urine.

Along the river walkway, people waved.

Someone shouted, “Ah, Lovely!”

Another yelled, “Wanker!”

According to a random statistic, eleven thousand people a year are injured while performing bizarre sexual postures, so I probably had nothing to lose with a dip in the Thames. It wasn't really that bad, especially now that I had eased into a soulful breaststroke like Byron used to swim, propelled by his strong arms and club foot. A breeze over the water dried my wet face. I realized that I was swimming into the heart of English literature, though instead of Byron's poetry, I murmured the first thirteen words from James Joyce's famously unreadable but linguistically wonderful novel *Finnegan's Wake*: " riverrun, past Eve and Adam's, from swerve of shore to bend of bay..."

In a sense, I'd already been into the drink with Lord Byron. But this was in the Coral Sea at Byron Bay Australia where I'd spent a year in a beach house with my wife Dale and two daughters Quinn and Sky writing my last book. All the swimmers, surfers, writers, travellers, artists and romantics converge on Byron Bay for inspiration, searching for ways to free themselves enough to find out what makes them happy in a cranked-up world in too much of a hurry. For Byronic people, nothing has changed in the last couple of hundred years, in Oz, London or anywhere else.

On my approach to Lambeth Bridge, to get into Byron's devil-may-care mode, I flipped over and did a slow, elegant backstroke, taking in the open sky. Six thousand steamers and five thousand sailing ships plied the Thames in the late 1800s. Now except for Police boats and Duck Tours, I seemed to have the river to myself.

Feeling downright cocky, I turned over and thrust forward twenty-five meters with a powerful breaststroke, relaxed for another hundred meters, then held my breath and submerged underwater for as long as I could until the murderous black silence scared the shit out of me. On one of Byron's longer swims across Lake Geneva, he often paused to sip a glass of wine a friend handed to him from a boat. "T'was a pleasing fear," is how he described open-water swimming. Like sex and travel, swimming provided Byron with an adrenalin rush and a buoyancy of spirit that satisfied the craving void he felt so often in the blaze of his short life. Everywhere Byron swam became sacred. Along the shores of the Gulf of La Spezia in Italy where the poet Shelley drowned, there was a cremation. As the flames engulfed his friend's body, Byron sought relief from his sorrow by diving into the sea and swimming two miles to his yacht offshore, and then back again to the funeral pyre. On the edge of these waters a plinth is dedicated to "Lord Byron, Noted English Swimmer and Poet."

Near Lambeth Bridge where Byron had begun his swim in 1807, I stopped to tread water, more or less at the epicentre of London. After his misguided death assisting the Greeks in their war against the Turks, in 1824, an undertakers barge moved up the Thames with Byron's body, and I thought about the irony of his words to describe his unquenchable desire for living: "The great object of life is sensation - to feel that we exist."

When Shelley's body washed up on the Italian shore they identified him by a copy of Keats's poetry in his coat pocket. The words inscribed on Keats's gravestone are: "Here lies one whose name was writ on water." Keats died at twenty-five, Shelley at twenty-nine, and Byron at thirty-five. At least these water-mad Romantic poets didn't have to deal with old age, or losing their mind to Alzheimer's like my poor dad. I've been in water so dirty and weedy it was like swimming in bile and intestines, but swimming with Byron had been a snap. Like most people, I've spent my whole life looking for something. I suppose that's what life should be: an unrelieved quest that finally ends.

So I began swimming back towards Vauxhall Bridge, against the pull of the tide, which is always a scary, exhilarating thing in water and in life. If I waited longer, the tide would change, surging in from the North Sea to wash me back in record time. I was ready to get out. I felt the same peace I'd experienced earlier on in my trip while I sat in the warm sunlit garden of Keats's house in Hampstead Heath, scribbling notes about Shelley and mad, bad and dangerous-to-know Byron. In a letter Keats penned before he died, he defined his famous notion about negative capability: "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

You might say my Byron swim was about Keats's negative capability. Like most all-purpose metaphors it can be bent or riffed to many uses: Peaceful acceptance of uncertainty. Going with or against the flow. Growing old and not giving a shit. Not being a tenured Professor, but enjoying naked liberty.

As we swim faster and faster along the current of time, the more we desire and the less likely we are to find what we are looking for, but this is nothing new. Screw the naysayers. There's nothing more satisfying than doing with one's body what the Lord had intended. Simple and uncomplicated, bro. Negative capability is something my late father-in-law, Ernie, who had survived as a Second World War Spitfire pilot stationed in England, called negative perspiration. Which I guess could also mean no sweat or no problem, like swimming with Lord Byron in the River Thames, in the middle of London's nearly eight million souls, and not giving a flying fuck.

Stroking into shore, instead being a Byronic hero, or a noble politically savvy athlete, I lurched out, more like a streaker in a Speedo. But I was strangely exhilarated. At least at the end of my life I'd have no regrets about the Byron swim. I began hot footing along the foreshore of sand and gravel, dodging mud sinkholes beneath the river wall. People were gawking and clapping. Someone yelled, "Wha' the 'ell?" Another yelled,"How's the bleedin' watah, mate?"

And I shouted, "Not too cold. Not too salty. Not too dirty. Bloody frickin' Byronic!"

Richard Taylor is the author of House Inside the Waves: Domesticity, Art and the Surfing Life, and teaches writing at Carleton University. He has dipped his toes in Hemingway's pool and most of the seven seas.

(This is a published excerpt that will be part of my book about swimming around the world with writers. It was cannibalized from my work in progress. In a much different form, it will be reintegrated into the narrative of my book.)