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Celebrity and the Spectacle of Nation

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CHAPTER I

Celebrity and the spectacle of nation

Jason Goldsmith

A decidedly promiscuous brand of renown, celebrity has a bad reputation. That reputation was characterised by Daniel Boorstin, who coined what has become a near-axiomatic definition of the celebrity as ‘a person who is known for his well-knownness’.¹ The tautological bent of Boorstin’s definition seems to suggest the meretricious nature of celebrities, famous not because they have done anything to merit acclaim, but because their images have been widely publicised and promoted. According to this logic, celebrities are superficial personalities, bold-faced names, air-brushed faces; they are slick images manufactured for the moment. Celebrities signify all that is shallow about contemporary society. Looking to account for the American fascination with stars, John Lahr has suggested that celebrities ‘substitute for the national lack of a historical consciousness’.² Deriding the presentism of American culture, Lahr’s remark is a fairly typical indictment of the vacuity of popular celebrity, especially its lack of historical validation. But what Lahr diagnoses as a symptom of twentieth-century America can be traced back to the Romantic period in Britain, and I find his comment especially telling in that it suggests a certain symmetry between popular celebrities and national consciousness, a symmetry I explore in the following pages.³ Essentially modern phenomena, both mass-media celebrity and the nation-state took shape during the early decades of the nineteenth century. Both memorialise their subjects. Both generate new models of consciousness and identification. Both are based on a regime of publicity and spectacle.

Building on Benedict Anderson’s still-valuable insights regarding the cultural mechanisms through which communities imagine themselves across space and time, scholars of the Romantic period have suggested how a diverse array of discourses such as antiquarianism and bardic culture, the historical novel and the national tale, and the rural landscape and architectural ruins were mobilised variously to imagine and contest the notion of Britain.⁴ Few, though, have considered how mass-media acclaim was co-extensive with the
rise of national consciousness during the Romantic period. In what follows, I do not simply offer a historical account of the parallel rise of celebrity and the nation state. Rather, through sections on Coleridge, Byron, Wordsworth, Clare, Hogg, the painter George Hayter and Madame Tussaud’s waxworks, I explore the ways in which these cultural formulations interacted with and shaped one another. Celebrity, I argue, was one of the mechanisms through which national sentiments were fostered among a diverse and heterogeneous populace. Whereas studies of Romantic nationalism have tended to emphasise how cultural nationalism looks to an imaginary past to conceptualise the nation, celebrities, I argue, provided an alternative strategy by which the nation could be contested both in and through the present.

Mass-media celebrity functions according to the principle of the simulacrum, adducing the private individual as public spectacle. ‘The spectacle’, however, ‘is not a collection of images’, as Guy Debord recognised; ‘rather it is a social relationship between people that is mediated by images’. In this sense celebrity is both analogous to – and generative of – the nation, which Benedict Anderson famously defined as an ‘imagined political community’, one of many possible ‘networks of social sympathy’. This insight helps us better understand the social utility of celebrity in creating and negotiating moral and political communities. Vectors of emotional identification, celebrities elaborate nations and national identities. We might think of celebrity as an extensive, industrialised, and intertextual mode of gossip, disseminating information, facilitating identifications, channelling desires, defining relations within a community, proscribing behaviours and legitimating values. Celebrity was – and remains – a way of embodying power.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge launched his *Biographia Literaria* (1817) by addressing the intense public interest in his person. ‘It has been my lot’, he observed, ‘to have had my name introduced both in conversation, and in print, more frequently than I find it easy to explain, whether I consider the fewness, unimportance, and limited circulation of my writings, or the retirement and distance, in which I have lived, both from the literary and political world.’ The poet’s bemusement is not unprecedented, but it is, I suspect, disingenuous. Notorious for his failure to produce poems, Coleridge courts the very publicity he denounces. Writing his literary biography, he attempts to set to rights a public image that has slipped beyond his control, framing his celebrity through an economy of textual scarcity by widely promoting it. The paucity of his work becomes an indicator of its value. Nearly a decade earlier, Coleridge attempted to come to terms with the perplexing contours of his popularity. ‘Of me and of my scanty juvenile writings people know nothing’, he wrote to Mathilda Betham, ‘but
it has been discovered, that I had the destiny of marrying the Sister of Mrs Southey, that I am intimate with Mr Southey, & that I am in a more especial manner the Friend and Admiser of Wordsworth'. Coleridge was well known, so he explained, not because of his poems, which were few indeed, but because of his personal associates. Accruing transitively, his notoriety exemplifies the networked structure of the modern star phenomenon and its economy of personal anecdote. In this moment we can see the shift fundamental to modern celebrity, a shift in which personality eclipsed accomplishment.

Not surprisingly, Coleridge looked to distance himself from what he saw as a tawdry form of reputation:

I should have been surprized even at any publicity of my name, if I were less aware of that sad sad stain of the present very anti-gallician but woefully gallicizing Age, the rage for personality – of talking & thinking ever and ever about A. and B. and L. – names, names, always names. The alliterations, 'Names & Novelties,' would go far in characterising the bad parts of the present generation.

With 'Names & Novelties', Coleridge elaborates two crucial aspects of the celebrity apparatus: the sense of intimacy or familiarity linked to names and the interchangeable nature of such names figured in the craving for novelty. Replacing initials for familiar names, his polysyndetic sequence 'A. and B. and L.' resists intimacy, the repeated conjunctions flattening any distinctions we might be tempted to make among these figures. Further, we should note, Coleridge freights his reputation with the contours of nationalism. Denouncing the public's fascination with personalities, he engages the emotional valences of British jingoism to denounce celebrity as a distinctly gallician import. Coleridge is right, I believe, to see a connection between mass-media acclaim and national identity. In so doing he implies that celebrity poses a threat to British integrity. What he fails to acknowledge, however, is the productive capacity of celebrity as social discourse.

An especially suggestive confluence of celebrity and nationalism can be found in George Hayter's The Duke of Wellington visiting the Effigy and Personal Relics of Napoleon (Fig. 1.1). Dressed in his customary blue coat and white trousers, the silver-haired Duke gazes intently on the wax effigy of his erstwhile foe, Napoleon, laid out on the camp bed on which he died and surrounded by the relics of Imperial ambition: the Star of the Legion of Honour, the cloak he wore at the battle of Marengo, the crown of Charlemagne, the sword from his Egyptian campaign, the mantle he wore at his coronation, and the standard he gave to his followers at Elba and which was later taken at Waterloo. The patriotic sentiments of this image
are patent. Juxtaposing these two military heroes, Hayter’s Wellington exhibits the dialectical model of national consciousness identified by Linda Colley in her account of how people living in the British Isles came to see themselves as ‘British’ – over and beyond being English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish – between the Act of Union (1707) and the crowning of Victoria (1837). The main impetus for the consolidation of this identity at home was the threat of an alien other, and Colley demonstrates how a series of wars with Catholic France forged Great Britain as a nation. Though joined by historical circumstance, the national icons differ markedly in Hayter’s portrayal. Impossibly young, Napoleon bears the trace of sanctity, his consecration as secular idol marked by the artefacts that draw for their effect on a long tradition of ecclesiastical veneration. In stark contrast to this ritualistic display stands the aged Wellington in unassuming garb, and Hayter’s stock allegory of the vanity of earthly pursuits underwrites a myth of British rectitude embodied by the sober, pensive Duke.

Portrait and history painter to Queen Victoria, Hayter is an interesting though neglected figure. He aspired to become ‘the painter of history of his
own time’, as he put it, and his best work exhibits a topicality that gives the syntax of that desire double meaning. Although he never attained preeminence in the genre historique, Hayter, perhaps more than any other serious artist of the day, was attuned to the historical implications of his own time, and throughout his tumultuous career he displayed a paparazzo’s eye and sense of timing: in 1814 he exhibited a miniature of Annabella Milbanke, Byron’s future wife, and his most famous work, *The House of Lords, 1820, The Trial of Queen Caroline* (1820–3), captures the sensational and at times tabloid aspects of his historical topics. Undertaken much later, *The Duke of Wellington* reflects, I think, a newfound maturity on the artist’s part and demonstrates his keen grasp of the instrumentality of modern celebrity. Deftly manipulating light and shadow to frame Wellington as the true centre of interest amid the welter of Napoleonic ephemera, Hayter stages a historical consciousness that is at once public and private. In so doing, he produces a specific type of national subject, one aligned with distinct celebrity effects. Inducing the ‘illusion of intimacy’ characteristic of mass-media celebrity, *The Duke of Wellington* privileges an intimate moment of private reflection as a public, national tableau. It is an illustration of interiority staged through the mechanism of spectacle.

That this encounter had actually taken place in Madame Tussaud’s popular waxworks compounds the spectacular underpinnings of Hayter’s tableau. In fact, the very idea for the painting came from Hayter’s friend Joseph Tussaud, Madame Tussaud’s eldest son. Early one morning while walking through the waxworks, Tussaud observed an elderly gentleman near the tableau of Napoleon waiting for the proprietors to pull back a curtain that was closed on it each night. No attendant in sight, Tussaud himself obliged, ‘whereupon’, as legend has it, ‘the visitor removed his hat, and, to his great surprise, Joseph saw that he was face to face with none other than the great Duke of Wellington himself. There stood his Grace contemplating with feelings of mixed emotions the strange and suggestive scene before him.” Hayter thought this a fit subject for a painting, the Tussaud brothers commissioned it, and it hung in their Napoleon Rooms until destroyed by fire in 1925. In Hayter’s portrait, Wellington seems unaware that he is being watched. It provides us with a rare and privileged glimpse of a public figure caught deep in private thought, absorbed by – and internalising – the scene before him. It aligns the viewer with Wellington by encouraging her to engage in a similar experience. *The Duke of Wellington*
thus recreates the deep emotional identifications it illustrates, constituting the nation as mediated by such affective bonds.

To what extent does this historical specificity impact how we read the patriotic sentiments and, more importantly, the national consciousness the painting establishes? Such questions, I believe, have great bearing on how we understand Romantic-era meditations on the nation-state and its various cultural articulations. From 1802, when Marie Tussaud first arrived in Britain from France with her moulds and figures, her exhibition embraced – and in so doing intensified – an emergent culture of celebrity.19 Relentlessly touring the country, Tussaud proved one of the most successful entrepreneurs of her day, commingling a core of historically significant individuals with an altogether more fungible collection of newsworthy names.20 In 1828, for example, Madame Tussaud unveiled her models of Byron and Scott, ‘anxious’, as was reported in one local paper, ‘to meet the wishes of her visitors who pressed her to model a likeness of Lord Byron in order that they might see together two of the greatest living poets of modern times’.21

Much of Marie Tussaud’s success can be attributed to the way in which she fostered nationalist sentiment. She capitalised on British fervour and tailored her shows to suit changes in national taste, reconfiguring scenes, resituating figures, and always adding to the vicarious experience of her patrons by acquiring the material trappings of famous events. In her 1820 Manchester show, for example, she staged a tableau of George IV’s extravagant coronation, enabling those who couldn’t make it to London to ‘experience’ the event, and ultimately purchased the coronation robes for £18,000.22 Like Westminster Abbey, to which it was frequently compared, Madame Tussaud’s functioned as a site of national cultural memory. The waxworks helped to foster the kinds of communities necessary for national consciousness in two related ways. First, it provided a place where visitors could gather and mingle safely. Second, it was a space in which a national historical consciousness was imagined and brought to life. As one visitor observed, ‘It seemed as if we had been ushered into the presence of the great dead, for the figures were natural as life ... and really it was difficult to distinguish the wax from the live flesh and blood.’23 At Tussaud’s the past was made present and nearly indistinguishable from contemporary life. So successful did this formula prove that by 1835, when the exhibition settled in its permanent location in Baker Street, ‘it had acquired’, as Richard Altick notes, ‘the popularity, if not the dignity, of a national institution, a sight of London coequal with the Abbey, the Tower, and St. Paul’s’.24

Not everyone viewed the waxworks so favourably, of course. In a lecture ‘On Poesy’ delivered to the London Philosophical Society (10 March 1818),
Coleridge undertook to define the nature of artistic genius. He distinguishes an imitation – composed of two distinct yet necessary (and necessarily visible) components, ‘likeness and unlikeness, or sameness and difference’ – from a copy by suggesting that the ‘impression on the wax is not an imitation, but a copy, of the seal; the seal itself is an imitation’. Coleridge is at pains here and throughout this lecture to contrast genius and craftsmanship. He eschews trompe l’ceil simulations of the real which replicate the superficial details of appearance, promoting external surfaces over inner depths. Such simulacra are, in fact, monstrous:

If there be likeness to nature without any check of difference, the result is disgusting, and the more complete the delusion, the more loathsome the effect. Why are such simulations of nature, as wax-work figures of men and women, so disagreeable? Because, not finding the motion and the life which we expected, we are shocked as by a falsehood, every circumstance of detail, which before induced us to be interested, making the distance from truth more palpable. You set out with a supposed reality and are disappointed and disgusted with the deception; whilst, in respect to a work of genuine imitation, you begin with an acknowledged total difference, and then every touch of nature gives you the pleasure of an approximation to truth.

Coleridge defines genuine art as an abstraction of the real and its proliferation of detail. The waxworks, in contrast, offered an extreme and disturbing case of verism. I am less interested here in Coleridge’s claims about art, which conform to Reynolds’ *Fifteenth Discourse*, than I am in his antipathy to wax.

Although Coleridge registers his misgivings in distinctly aesthetic terms, we might attribute them as well to the metonymic relationship the waxworks bore to celebrity culture. Both offer simulacra of personality. ‘There is something absolutely frightful in this multiplication of one’s self to infinity’, remarked Felicia Hemans after visiting the studio of Angus Fletcher where she found ‘at least six Mrs Hemans, placed as if to greet me in every direction’. This near limitless capacity to circulate reproductions of the unique ‘self’ makes celebrity such a potent technology of identity, and Coleridge clearly understood that in what he called ‘this age of literary and political gossiping’, the writer’s personality had become a symbolic asset, a mechanically reproducible representation circulated to a public more familiar with the writer’s ostensible private life than his or her work. The proliferation of mediated representations fuelled public interest in the individual’s private life and personality, as John Clare discovered on the publication of his *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820). Of the numerous visitors who found their way to his small cottage in Helpstone
he complained: ‘I am sought after very much agen, now 3 days scarcely pass off but somebody calls … surely the vanity woud have kill’d me 4 years ago if I had known then how I shoud have been hunted up – & extolled by personal flattery – but let me wait another year or two & t[he] peep show will be over.’ Attracting curiosity seekers who would travel miles from London to see him, Clare became a tourist attraction in his own right, and he prefigures the complaints of contemporary stars about their loss of privacy. In so doing, Clare illuminates for us the mechanisms through which rural figures were so effectively constituted as emblems of national identity. His reference to the peep show, in which the individual has become the object of an anonymous gaze, exposes the voyeurism inherent in literary celebrity, a structure that binds reader and writer in a dialectic of imaginary intimacy.

It was Byron, of course, who inaugurated the new technics of mass-media celebrity. But the terms of Byron’s renown interest me here less than the way in which his acclaim was understood, articulated, and contested by his contemporaries. ‘Whatever general judgment we may pronounce on his qualities as a writer, guiding ourselves by the rules of criticism’, wrote John Scott, the editor of the London Magazine, ‘there can be no doubt of his standing a towering object in the moral and intellectual horizon of his age’. While Scott’s review offers one of the most perspicacious contemporary accounts of Byron’s poetry, it is, ultimately, an attempt to come to terms with Byron’s signal position in the public imagination. Byron exists beyond the ‘rules of criticism’, an embodied indulgence of convention signifying not merely an individual but a cultural effect, and Scott is keenly attuned to the significance of ‘Byron’ as a monument, a ‘towering object’ that defines the moral horizon.

While few of Byron’s contemporaries would dispute his significance, the nature of his influence was widely contested in the press. Scott, for instance, denounced Byron’s sentimental displays of suffering ‘not merely as offensive spectacles, but as dangerous causes of the deformity of others by operating on susceptible dispositions with their diseased and monstrous influence’. Such concerns were not unfounded. Eliciting a powerful, emotive response, Byron’s poetry has an affective force. Celebrities generate intense if not always realistic identifications, and numerous fan letters attest to Byron’s effect on readers. One young admirer admitted, ‘To you I am indebted for almost all the happy hours I have spent, my day-dreams have been full of you.’ The series of letters Isabella Harvey posted to Byron attest to a certain fantastical attachment. She claims, ‘You will scarcely understand [my apprehension in writing you] because you could never have felt the
powerful influence great minds obtain over weak ones. This empire you obtained over me by means of your writings, but even this can hardly account for the sentiments I feel for you', and in a subsequent letter recognises the irrational nature of her desire: 'You tell me I am deluded by my imagination with regard to the sentiments I bear you. No matter if it be an illusion how much more delightful it is than reality. I abjure reality forever.' These letters exemplify the 'habit of false intimacy' that characterises modern celebrity culture. We should not mistake this cathexis as purely sexual (although the letters do bear the trace of such desire), for Harvey's devotion is ultimately idolatrous. Byron turns desire inward, towards the private space of imagination, inspiring an emotional identification so intense it seems to displace all other social bonds. Harvey's repudiation of the real would seem to discount any interpretation of Byron as constitutive of national, communal sentiments. That celebrity could mobilise such acute imaginary identifications, however, suggests its utility in fostering a national consciousness that operated across vast expanses of space and time.

It was this very capacity of Byron to colonise the imagination of readers that caused such consternation among reviewers, even those who approved of his poetry. In a favourable review of *Childe Harold* canto four, for example, John Wilson observed that Byron's 'fame is more than literary fame; and he aims in poetry, like the fallen chief whose image is so often before him, at universal dominion, we had almost said, universal tyranny, over the minds of men'. Although celebrity is a highly eroticised modality of renown, Wilson's remark suggests that the celebrity's influence need not always be mapped in these terms, particularly along gender lines. Instead, Wilson here draws upon the popular rhetoric of revolutionary debate, alluding to Napoleon to characterise Byron's egotistical drive, his universal popularity and his psychological effect. Wilson is clearly attuned to the potential political implications of Byron's influence over his readers, and his description attests to the slippage between the poetical and the political at the point of celebrity. The rhetoric of nationalism frequently colours discussions of Byron. Southey denounced *Don Juan* as 'a foul blot on the literature of his country, an act of high treason on English poetry', while Wordsworth was 'persuaded that *Don Juan* will do more harm to the English character, than anything of our time'. We might attribute such denunciations, expressed in the confidence of private correspondence, to sour grapes and dismiss the patriotic sentiments as rhetorical flourish. But if, as I suggest, celebrities channel the emotional identifications through which communities are constituted, then we need to treat such expressions more seriously.
In what remains one of the most insightful analyses of the modern star system, Richard Dyer offers a model for considering the social utility of celebrity culture. He notes: ‘[S]tar images function crucially in relation to contradictions within and between ideologies, which they seek variously to “manage” or resolve. In exceptional cases … stars, far from managing contradictions, either expose them or embody an alternative or oppositional ideological position (itself usually contradictory) to dominant ideology.’

Dyer rejects evaluative modes that criticise mass-media culture and instead suggests that we ‘think in terms of the relationships … between stars and the specific instabilities, ambiguities and contradictions in the culture’. This observation helps us understand why celebrity emerged as a formative cultural discourse during the revolutionary years of Romanticism, a moment when the traditional social order was coming under increasing calls for reform from groups that had been long disenfranchised.

The instrumentality of modern celebrity is apparent in John Scott’s attack upon the editors of Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, John Gibson Lockhart and John Wilson, for strategically deploying anonymity and pseudonymity as cover for vituperative and libellous personal attacks. In so doing, Scott publicly admonishes Walter Scott for ‘setting a bad precedent’ – his refusal to put his name to the Waverley Novels ‘has proved a mischievous example … turned to unworthy purposes in meaner and sordid hands’ – and for supporting John Wilson’s bid for the chair of moral philosophy at the University of Edinburgh.

We can see a similar dynamic at work in reviews of Byron. Of *Beppo*, for example, William Roberts felt ‘quite sure that many a maiden and many a mother, *British-born* and *British-bred*, will rise from the perusal of this little delightful display of Italian manners, this light and sportive raillery on the marriage vow, with many troublesome prejudices removed … to live in
charity with her neighbours of the other sex’. 46 Roberts echoes complaints about the pernicious effect Byron had on the moral sensibilities of his readers. And he appeals to nationalist prejudices in pressing his claim. But it is the structure of this appeal that reveals another way in which celebrity contributes to the national symbolic. Configuring morality along national lines – ‘British-born and British-bred’ – Roberts deplores that:

Lord Byron, an English nobleman, an English husband, and an English father … could, at a distance from his country and home, with a full knowledge of what makes that country great and prosperous, her families honourable, her sons manly and true, and her daughters the objects of delicate and respectful love, send among us a tale of pollution dipped in the deepest die of Italian debauchery.47

As was Walter Scott in the example above, Byron is here called to task for corrupting ‘his country and home’. Byron, though, functions symbolically, as the ground upon which a specific figure of the nation can be inscribed. In criticising Byron for importing ‘Italian debaucheiy’, Roberts shrewdly parleys the erotic overtones of Byron’s celebrity into a more manageable British propriety, depicting the nation as an imagined moral community based in a chaste, domestic femininity. 48

Elaborating this concept of the moral nation, The British Critic characterises Don Juan as ‘a manual of profligacy. Its tendency is not only to excite the passions, but to point out the readiest means and method of their indulgence’, but remains convinced that ‘it is not, we trust, by the maudlin and meritricious [sic] cant … of the poem before us, that the British nation is to be tricked out of that main bulwark of its national strength, its sturdy and unbending morality’. 49 The moral integrity that distinguishes the British character ensures the nation’s ascendancy in international affairs. Any diminution in virtue, the review implies, would compromise national security. A sturdy and unbending morality thus attests to an unfltering sense of purpose, an imperturbable national destiny. Such confident myths of national integrity reassure the populace in times of uncertainty and justify both the nation and its foreign policy in an era of imperial expansion. In threatening this moral community, Byron became a flashpoint for controversies of national identity.

As symbolic figure, Byron’s meaning was unstable. He meant different things to different groups, and those meanings shifted over time. In his anonymous pamphlet, John Bull’s Letter to Lord Byron, John Gibson Lockhart leverages these same filiations of nation and celebrity to present a different portrait of the British character. Assuming the voice of John Bull, Lockhart balances this matter-of-fact, plain-dealing, stolid national personification of
the United Kingdom with the contemporary icons through which the nation was being actively debated. He apportions Britain between the two pre-eminent literary celebrities of the day, allocating Scotland to Walter Scott and England to Byron:

England is yours, if you choose to make it so. – I do not speak of the England of days past, or of the England of days to come, but of the England of the day that now is, with which, if you be not contented, you are about as difficult to please as a Buonaparte. There is nobody but yourself who has any chance of conveying to posterity a true idea of the spirit of England in the days of his Majesty George IV. Mr Wordsworth may write fifty years about his ‘dalesmen’; … but you know what neither Mr Wordsworth or any Cumberland stamp-master ever can know. You know the society of England, – you know what English gentlemen are made of, you know very well what English ladies are made of; and, I promise you, that knowledge is a more precious thing, whatever you at present may think or say, than any notion you or any other Englishman ever can acquire either of Italians, or Spaniards, or Greeks. 50

Lockhart’s Byron is distinctly cosmopolitan, especially in contrast to Wordsworth, who obsesses over a rural ethnos. In the voice of the people, Lockhart debunks the ethnic myth of national origin by privileging Byron’s cosmopolitanism over Wordsworth’s nostalgia. At the same time, though, Lockhart recuperates Byron as emblematic of England. He is at once worldly and national. Lockhart’s John Bull propounds a metropolitan England constituted as an oblique field of knowledge, the nation as epistemological state, as it were. Membership in this imagined community is based on access to knowledge it refuses to elaborate directly. Byron does not import a debilitating foreign immorality but rather reveals the true essence of the English character, as any true Englishman would, of course, recognise. And while Lockhart urges the poet to make England his subject, it is Byron’s cosmopolitanism – his extensive engagement with the world beyond the nation’s geographical and imaginative borders – that provides him such insight into the English character. Byron refracts Englishness by way of Italy, Spain and Greece.

A star whose effect was distinctly transnational, Byron embodies the dialectical tensions through which nations come to understand themselves as such. The nation only exists in the context of other nations. Further, Byron’s emblematic function is doubly interesting in that both his literal and his symbolic motility stand in for the vexed nature of Britain, a multi-national entity encompassing England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Britishness, as Linda Colley observes, did not displace but overlay these other affiliations. 51 Hence Lockhart, a Scot, can assume the voice of John
Bull, an English personification, to mock the jingoism inherent in the widespread and uncritical use of John Bull as a symbol for the entire United Kingdom. Britain was – and remains – a fluid concept. Celebrities provided one way in which affiliations among the diverse inhabitants of this political entity were imagined, mobilised and contested. Byron’s very cosmopolitanism thus becomes the basis for nationalist claims.

The extraordinary elasticity of the celebrity image, coupled with its ability to foster strong emotional identifications, made it an ideal technology for the shaping of national consciousness. As John Scott observed, Byron ‘casts his shadow from afar over the surface of our society; and he is talked of in book-clubs and ballrooms as the only companion which the age has produced to the French revolution’.

Byron here does more than stimulate private fantasies of the sort described in the letters of Isabella Harvey. The subject of intense conversation among various groups, he provides the ligature for a community that both experiences and understands itself through his image. The very nature of these discussions, in which Byron is equated to an epochal event, the French revolution, reveals celebrity as coextensive with the rise of national consciousness, and the phenomenon of Byron illustrates the complex development of Britain as a modern, political nation-state. Scott acknowledges that:

Britain expands under the sign of Byron, and his poetic influence is figured in distinctly geo-political terms. Scott recognised the imperial aspect of Byron, not simply on the minds of his readers at home, but also on history. Byron and his poetry exhibit a double effect, an imaginative extension through space and time of ancient empires (Athens, Arqua, Rome and Venice) which are then recuperated and subjugated under the Byronic sign. There is a sense, then, in which Byronism, despite Byron’s championing of nationalist independence movements, underwrites the British colonial enterprise.

The relentless and frequently vituperative public debates that dogged Byron and other literary celebrities such as Mary Robinson, ‘L. E. L.’, Hemans, Coleridge, Clare and James Hogg reveal the complex negotiations through which a collective cultural identity is legitimised. But how do specific celebrities evoke the historical consciousness necessary for imagining the
nation through time? Whereas Byron maps Britain transversely, the figure of James Hogg provides an alternative model of the nation that collapses history within a specific geographical location. Hogg found himself displaced in the public eye by his toping alter ego, the vulgar yet endearing ‘Ettrick Shepherd’ portrayed in the pages of Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine. He signified less a particular individual than a type, ‘the regular fool-capped, bell-coated Zany of their Magazine’, as John Scott put it. Careful to distinguish this popular image from the actual poet, Scott offers a likeness he believed coterminous with the flesh and blood writer. ‘[W]e speak’, he urged his readers to remember:

only of their representation. Hogg himself remains the poetical shepherd, the pastoral enthusiast, a living link, such as no country but Scotland possesses, between the present and the past. While he lives, the great and final gulf of division is not yet interposed between the simplicity and elevated imagination of an innocent, religious, and patriarchal people, and the artifice and pretention of what is called refined civilization.

In this account, Hogg becomes a national symbol, administering a rich, imagined past to a mannered and unnatural present. EmbODYing a historical consciousness that is temporally continuous, Hogg incarnates the ethnic myth of the nation as rooted in an indigenous folk. This temporal unity then dilates through space, as Hogg balances the earnest, rural peasantry so familiar from Romantic myth, with their shallow, urban counterparts. A space of mediation in which past and present, country and city, commingle on a single plane, Hogg encourages that transverse, lateral experience of ‘homogeneous empty time’ that Benedict Anderson has identified as crucial to the nation as a distinctive type of imagined community.

Scott’s idealised James Hogg, though, is no less a manufactured symbol than the ‘bell-coated Zany’ of Blackwood’s. And despite his assertion of verisimilitude, Scott imbues Hogg with a totemic significance, transforming the poet into what Pierre Nora has called ‘un lieu de mémoire’: a realm of memory through which the national past is remembered and negotiated in the present. This is, of course, the irony of celebrity; it promotes the illusion of individuality while simultaneously manufacturing that unique personality as an alienable commodity, as 1930s screen legend Myrna Loy knowingly observed: ‘I daren’t take any chances with Myrna Loy, for she isn’t my property … [T]he studio has spent millions of dollars on the personality known as Myrna Loy … I’ve got to be, on all public occasions, the personality they sell at the box office.’ Loy’s remark suggests that we might consider the celebrity a fetishised commodity. Smooth and polished, it effaces the social conditions of its production.
We can see this same process at work in Hayter’s *Wellington*, which is just as interesting for what it conceals as for what it reveals. The painting originally included Joseph Tussaud drawing back the curtain in one corner of the canvas. Hayter records in his diary that according to Henry Graves, who had exhibited the unfinished painting to subscribers after purchasing the copyright to engrave it, ‘the intense admiration of my picture of Wellington + Nap’nic relics was considered as much diminished by my introduction in it of the port. of Tussaud, and that it wd. probably make a difference to them of £1,000 in the sale’. Hayter immediately returned to his studio, where he ‘effaced my friend Tussaud with much regret, for he deserved to be there’. Deserving or not, the showman compromised the painting’s value, both economic and symbolic. It took just two days to eliminate all trace of Tussaud, at which point Hayter reflected, ‘Although I feel that 100yrs. hence everybody wd. have approved of Mr Tussaud’s being in the picture, … I must confess … that [his] rubicund face + countenance … rather injured the pathos + excited a separate interest.’ Tussaud’s incongruous presence – ‘on his knees holding back the curtain to show the bed, + pointing, with his left hand to the written board’ – called undue attention to the machinery of national mythmaking. And Hayter replaced him with artefacts – Napoleon’s coronation robe, the sword from his Egyptian campaign, the standard captured at Waterloo – more suited to an epochal tableau.

This same fetish-logic structures the nationalism of much Romantic verse. Holding in dynamic tension celebrity and its equally ineffable yet ineluctable correlative, modern nationalism, Hayter’s portrait demonstrates that we might also consider the ways in which Romantic poets sought to cultivate their celebrity as a form of social capital. I would suggest, further, that Romantic writers not only made use of the formative resources of popular celebrity in negotiating their status within a volatile literary field, but did so in terms that are almost inevitably coloured by nationalist discourses. Their celebrity demonstrates the dialogic and discursive nature of public identities, illustrating how Romantic authors were at one and the same time writers and emblematic myths through which individuals and often entire communities looked to contest and consolidate the dramatic cultural changes with which they were faced.

**NOTES**


5. For a thorough and nuanced account of the development of a distinctly English, as opposed to a British, national consciousness, see Krishan Kumar, *The Making of English National Identity* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), especially Chapter 3. Trumpener identifies Britain as a ‘patched-together empire’ (p. 15) and Britishness as administrative at best. Ireland, Wales and Scotland all had strong nationalist reactions to colonisation.

6. P. David Marshall has shown how ‘[t]he material reality of the celebrity sign – that is, the actual person who is at the core of the representation – disappears into a cultural formation of meaning’. P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 57.


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12. Coleridge, *Collected Letters*, p. 84. Although his private letter to Mathilda Betham condemns this public fashion, it participates in the very circuit of celebrity it looks to bypass. Betham, a miniature painter, was to reproduce Coleridge’s likeness in 1809, further publicising his image.

13. The illustration is a mezzotint (1854) by James Scott. Hayter’s painting (December 1852) was destroyed by fire in 1925.

14. The overtly patriotic dimensions of Hayter’s painting were probably magnified by the fact that he completed the work shortly after the death of Wellington (14 September 1852) and his extravagant public state funeral (18 November 1852).

15. While she acknowledges dissenting voices, Colley focuses on supporters of Britain in order better to understand that response. Alternative models of Romantic nationalism that examine the complex internal tensions of Great Britain, particularly in relation to the celtic periphery, have been offered by Trumpener, Pittock, Ferris and Davis. See also Kumar.


22. Altick, *Shows*, p. 334. The coronation captured the public interest and was also re-enacted on Drury Lane by Robert William Elliston, and recreated as a panorama by Henry Aston Barker. Altick, *Shows*, pp. 177–8.


26. Although it seems counterintuitive, Coleridge defines imitation as the mark of genius.
29. Henry F. Chorley, Memorials of Mrs Hemans with Illustrations of her Literary Character from her Private Correspondence, 2 vols. (London: Saunders and Otley, 1836), II, 124.
32. Clare’s use of this traditional form of popular entertainment as an analogy for his experience of celebrity draws upon the vulgar associations it had acquired in educated circles. But, more significantly, I think, it reveals the extent to which celebrity conjures up a persuasive virtual reality. As Richard Altick has observed, ‘The peepshow, framed and lighted, consisted of modelled groups of figures placed against a painted background; they were not seen directly, but as reflected in a slanted mirror on the principle of the camera obscura’ (Altick, Shows, p. 56). The point is that like the panorama, although on a much different scale, the peepshow offered an all-encompassing simulation of reality by blocking out unframed material. The force of Clare’s analogy, then, is that the peepshow replaced reality with a representation of reality.
35. Scott, ‘Living Authors’, 52.
39. Schickel, Intimate, p. 7. See also Mole, Byron, for an elaboration of what he calls the ‘hermeneutic of intimacy’ during the Romantic era.
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43. Ibid., p. 35.
45. Ibid., 518.
47. Ibid.
48. It was, of course, this very ideal of marriage and morality as the foundation of British national identity that Byron attacked in Don Juan. Indeed, I would suggest that the highly sexualised nature of celebrity, its framework of intimacy, is what enables such claims of nationhood.
51. See also Trumpener, Bardic and Kumar, English.
52. Scott, 'Living Authors', 59.
53. Ibid.
54. John Scott, 'The Mohock Magazine', London Magazine 2 (December 1820), 578 [678]. Appearing in seventy-one spry instalments from 1822 through 1835, the 'Noctes Ambrosianae' offered a running commentary on the business of running Blackwood's Magazine. Fuelled by prodigious quantities of food and drink, the table-talk of the principals, editor Christopher North, Morgan Odoherty, Timothy Tickler and James Hogg, was a dizzying monthly survey of the most pressing aesthetic, cultural and political concerns of the day. While these fictional figures were based on Blackwood's editors and contributors for the most part, only Hogg had a pseudonym that was actually his name.
55. Scott, 'Mohock', 578 [678].
60. Ibid.
61. Ibid.
62. Ibid.
63. The effacement of Tussaud from this image illustrates the logic of Romantic nationalism identified by Marlon Ross in 'Romancing': 'what Burke and the romantics tend to suppress is the machinery of modern nationalism, the fact that it functions like a series of interlocking cogs, fueled by coal and capital, rather than like a patriarchical tribe, motivated by the instinctual love of kin that spreads out into loyalty for the national kind' (p. 58). See also Dino Felluga's analysis of the fetish-logic of Scott’s verse romances, which 'provided the British monarchy and the British government with a new ideology of self-legitimation'. Dino Franco Felluga, *The Perversity of Poetry: Romantic Ideology and the Popular Male Poet of Genius* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2005), pp. 8–9.