Trelawny’s Dagger

On the 24th of March, 1822, a party which included Lord Byron, Percy Bysshe Shelley, and their friend Edward Trelawny rode out of Pisa for an afternoon of pistol practice. On their return into the city, a fight ensued with an Italian dragoon. By the end of the day, the dragoon lay mortally wounded, and all members of the Shelley-Byron circle were under investigation. Trelawny, who was described by Claire Clairmont as dining out ‘on the strength of his acquaintance with Byron’, would in later life recount the story of this fight accompanied by his prop—the dagger—which he claimed had been given to him by a blind beggar in order to defend himself. The dagger is perhaps the perfect example of Trelawny’s penchant for adding detail and exaggerating his own role in stories; he was a man in whom theatricality, extravagance, and an inclination to fabricate the truth went hand in hand. It gives an insight into not only the life and character of Trelawny, but through the stories it yields, it tells of his relationships with Byron and Shelley.

Trelawny was 29, the same age as Shelley, when he visited Pisa in 1822. Trelawny was introduced to Shelley and Byron and quickly became a part of their social circle thanks to his exciting seafaring tales, romantic adventures, and ‘strange stories of himself’. Nicknamed ‘The Pirate’, Trelawny seemed to model himself on Conrad, the protagonist of Byron’s poem, *The Corsai*r*,* which Trelawny was rumoured to keep a copy of under his pillow. Mary Shelley described him as ‘6 feet high, raven black hair, which curls thickly and shortly, like a Moor’s, dark gray expressive eyes, overhanging brows, upturned lips’, although she added, disarmingly, that he had ‘a smile which expresses good nature and kind-heartedness’.[[1]](#footnote-1) He was drawn particularly to Shelley, whose radical politics and idealism appealed to him, but he had a more conflicted relationship with Byron, who did not live up to Trelawny’s expectations of the heroic character and ‘solemn mystery’ perpetuated by his poetry and fame; Byron’s poetic projection in *Don Juan* and *The Corsair* had seemingly more in common with Trelawny than with himself.[[2]](#footnote-2) Shelley was the man Trelawny wished he could be, but it was perhaps some reflection or even a parody of Byron he had become.

Trelawny joined the Pisan circle as they enjoyed riding, shooting, dining and opera. He also brought with him an enthusiasm for boat building, which was to have fatal consequences for Shelley. It was following a customary ride out of the city on a Sunday afternoon that the incident with the dragoon occurred. In addition to Byron, Shelley and Trelawny, Byron’s friends Count Pietro Gamba, John Taaffe, and Captain John Hay rode with them. The riders were strung out across the road, trotting their horses back into Pisa, when an Italian dragoon, racing back to Pisa, galloped through the group, spooking Taaffe’s horse. Affronted, the party set off in pursuit of the dragoon. Catching up with him at the gate, they immediately began haranguing him and demanding his name. Sargent-Major Stefano Masi—the dragoon—would answer only in Italian and French insults, but once Byron and Trelawny began ordering satisfaction (a duel), he commanded the guards that they all be arrested. Furious, Count Gamba attacked Masi with his whip while Shelley launched his horse at him. Shelley was knocked brutally from his horse, while Captain Hay, wielding nothing but a riding crop to Masi’s sabre, was slashed across the face. In an account written the next day, which is now held at the Keats-Shelley House, Trelawny tells of his involvement in the fight:

*Two dismounted men in soldiers habits with swords came to his assistance one seased [seized] on my horse rein at this moment the dragoon made a violent blow at me with his sword—I put out my arm to arrest his when the foot soldier made a cut at me—I forced my horse on through the gates and escaped being wounded although both the swords struck me.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Having got the better of the Englishmen, and knowing it, Masi turned and entered Pisa through one of the city gates.

Byron immediately returned to his Palazzo Lanfranchi and, now armed, went in search of Masi. He found him close by, on the Lung’Arno, and Masi, still also on horseback, held out his hand to Byron and asked: ‘Siete contento?’ (‘Are you happy?’). Outraged, Byron went to unsheathe his sword while his servant grabbed Masi’s bridle. Sensing the danger he was in, Masi broke free and rode away, but as he passed the Palazzo Lanfranchi, one of Byron’s servants came up behind him and thrust a pitchfork into his side. Masi was able to ride away, before collapsing and being carried to a doctor. Word quickly spread that he would not live out the night, as well as other fabrications which Shelley’s friend Edward Williams, who had not joined this particular shooting trip, gave a summary of in his journal that evening:

*The report already in circulation about Pisa is that a party of peasants having risen in insurrection, made an attack upon the guard headed by some Englishmen, that the guard maintained their ground manfully against an awful number of the armed insurgents that they were at length defeated, one Englishman, whose name was Trelawny, left dead at the gate, and Lord B. mortally wounded[[4]](#footnote-4)*

Servants were sent flying about Pisa as the Englishmen tried to ensure that their side of the story was heard. In the following days, the members of the party were investigated, but when Masi made a full recovery, it seemed unlikely there would be any ramifications, except that this was to initiate the end of the Pisan circle. Shelley’s relationship with Byron had become increasingly strained while in Pisa, and so the circle was broken.

Trelawny’s dagger is distinctly absent from the accounts of the dragoon incident, but as an artefact, its significance is its ability to forge a link, however tenuous, with the past. A few months after the incident, on the 8th of July, 1822, Shelley and Edward set sail for Lerici, where they had been living for a while. Trelawny, who had planned to escort them, was held back by customs officers. He later claimed, perhaps rightly, that if he had not been prevented from sailing, he might have been able to save them. Through his telescope, Trelawny watched their boat disappear into a sea fog. Ten days later the bodies of Percy Bysshe Shelley and Edward Williams were washed up. Trelawny oversaw the burning of Shelley’s body, immortalised in a painting by Louis Edward Fournier, and snatched Shelley’s unburnt heart from the pyre. A year later, he would join Byron on his Greek adventure and, although not present at his death, Trelawny again rushed to his body to take care of the funeral arrangements.

Trelawny lived until he was 88. For him, the boundary between truth and fiction was always blurred, but the stories he told, sometimes accompanied by props like his dagger, did much to elevate and immortalise the legacies of some of England’s greatest poets. When he died in 1881, over half a century after his two friends, his ashes were carried to Italy to be buried alongside Shelley’s in Rome.

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1. Mary Shelley, Letter to Maria Gisborne, 9February 1822. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Edward John Trelawny, *Recollections of the Last Days of Shelley and Byron* (London: Edward Moxton, 1858), p. 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Trelawny account, 25th March 1822. Trelawny’s spelling was notoriously bad, so much so that he often misspelt his own name ‘Jhon’, which has led most of his biographers to conclude that he was dyslexic to some degree. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Richard Garnett, ed., *Journal of Edward Ellerker Williams* (London: Elkin Mathews, 1902), pp. 43-44. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)