

*"In the beginning was the word . . ."*

## **Loughborough and Lady Byron** **A co-operative Society Letter: 1832**

**John Corina**

Heritage-by-association is a strange phenomenon. Stanford hall, the heart of the International Co-operative College overlooking Loughborough was formerly the seat of Sir Julien Cahn; a millionaire renowned throughout the Nottingham area as a philanthropic if partisan conservator of the Byronic heritage and its memorabilia, second only to Byron's publisher, John Murray. Among the collection of *Byronia* at Newstead Abbey, however, are very few items relating to Byron's wife **Lady Byron**; the most significant document on display being the bulky 1815 marriage settlement.

Split apart in life, the Radical poet and exiled lover, the late **Lord Byron** (1788-1824), 6th Baron of Rochdale, and his Co-operator-daughter **Ada Lovelace** (1815-52) now rest together at Hucknall Torkhard church, not too distant from Stanford Hall. **Lady Annabella Noel Byron** (1792-1860), unique as the leading Regency Co-operator immortalised in *Don Juan*, rests in peace elsewhere, alone, at Kensal Green Cemetery, London. Her name, chiselled among the honoured ranks of once-famous Co-op pioneers, is inscribed upon Joseph Corfield's striking Victorian 'Co-operators and Reformers' Monument', still standing near the neglected Robert Owen memorial inside the cemetery. Lord Byron's monument lay in his splendid legacy to Romantic poetry and Greece. Lady Byron's magnificent historical legacy lay in the creation, collectively with Georgian working-class men and women, of the working concept of the Co-operative Store as the gateway to an entirely new form of industrial and political civilisation. The swift progress of practical-yet-visionary store-based trading societies, it was then believed, would quickly transform the cruel 'old immoral world' of industrial *laissez-faire* through collective self-help, ultimately elevating society into the noble moral character, economic harmony and happiness of a 'Co-operative Community'.

## A Historically Significant Letter

The historically significant document reproduced here for the *Journal of Co-operative Studies* originally accompanied a (costly) despatch to Lady Noel Byron, Acton; addressed from the Co-operative Stores, Top of the Market Place, Loughborough, September 14 1832. Neither the protocols, nor the phraseology nor the calligraphy imitate the more hackneyed styles commonly utilised by the late-Georgian commercial clerk. Quill-penned in an unusually neat hand, it records a Co-operative gift piquantly expressing the gratitude of Loughborough's working class Co-operators to their economic champion, Lady Byron. It was sent just after suppression of the unruly Midland demands for working-class male suffrage and the final enactment of the class-biased 1832 Reform Act.

This is the earliest-known manuscript and surviving communication of the Loughborough Co-operative Society. It is also apparently the oldest-known surviving corporate manuscript letter written *officially* by a Co-operative Society, in the form of a Store-headed document, anywhere in the history of Great Britain and Ireland, perhaps so in Europe. Although the provenance remains beyond dispute, the alleged precedence may be open to challenge; since a number of older (but more personal) manuscript letters of Georgian Co-operators have been conserved. Pre-Rochdale Co-operative history is full of archival surprises. Hopefully, some earlier document of this specific genus, signed on behalf of a Society by a Secretary, may yet emerge to see the light of day.

Who were the senders? Formed in January 1829 and inspired by Dr. William King's journal, *The Co-operator*, the Loughborough Co-operative Society led by John Skevington (Secretary and then 'Chair') had accumulated £400 capital with 54 members by 1832; operating a retail store and also co-operatively manufacturing lace and hosiery products. Poor rate single 'wages' in Loughborough were then effectively around 4/- a week. John Skevington, a leading regional figure, energetically promoted a number of co-operative-producer ventures to sustain poverty-stricken Leicester stockings and was particularly proud of the 'satellite' Leicester 3rd Co-operative Society launched in late 1829. Six months before he wrote the missive to Lady Byron, John

Skevington had served as a Midlands delegate to the week-long 'Great' London Co-operative Congress of 1832. There he saw 'Orator' John Watson, the London Co-operator most feared by the die-hard aristocracy as a dangerous 'Agitator', quote the fiery poetry of Lord Byron to the cheering ranks of humble and voteless workingmen Co-operators. Eight years after his death at Missolonghi (1824), Byron, the liberator, was warmly remembered among the Loughborough and Leicester framework-knitters of 1832. Byron had been the sole peer to politically assist the Leicester and Nottingham stockingers, harshly crushed and castigated as 'Luddites' in their years of economic distress. He had handsomely subscribed to their Bill Committee in 1812. With the Co-operators' 1832 message a gift was enclosed of two pairs of very fine, lacework fancy-stockings:- "One pair for yourself. Another for your Ladyship's daughter."

### **Ada, Countess Lovelace, née Byron**

Who were the recipients? Lady Byron's daughter was, in fact, Ada Byron, the sole legitimate child of the late Lord Byron; perhaps the first English noblewoman to receive a Co-operative moral education and intellectual upbringing. Within the family circle, she had been called "Our Young Co-operator" since the age of 14; developing into a serious young lady who, on her own testimony, read every issue of *The Co-operator* "with great delight". Fully-committed to Co-operation, at the age of 19, in 1832 she proudly dressed in London-made Co-operative silks and slept beneath fine blankets supplied by the Huddersfield Society. At 21, she would encourage her former tutor, Arabella Lawrence, who left Middlesex to found the Gatacre Co-operative Society (near Liverpool), to write the first-ever *History of the Rise and Progress of a Co-operative Society* in 1834. Dr. William King, almost her surrogate father, introduced her to the Cambridge University mathematics Tripos syllabus; while her mother taught her bookkeeping and the abstract principles of Co-operation, and introduced her to the leading Co-operative figures. Ada was presented at Brighton to King William IV and Queen Adelaide (the latter very warmly disposed towards the Co-operative Movement) in 1833, seven years before Robert Owen's controversial Court presentation to Queen Victoria. Married to

Lord King in 1835, Ada Byron has been rediscovered in the twentieth century as the famous Countess Lovelace, popularly associated with the birth of computer programming.

### **Annabella, Lady Noel Byron, née Milbanke**

Her celebrated mother Annabella Byron was only 40 in 1832. A 'single-parent' since early 1816, she had remained eminently self-contained, practical, and energetic; highly privileged yet driven by a religiously-inspired social conscience towards radically changing the world through Co-operation and educational enlightenment. A Leicester County heiress, intellectually-gifted beyond the dreams of any Jane Austen heroine, Annabella had finally inherited (from her mother) the imposing Kirkby Mallory estates near Leicester in 1822. By 1832, locally established as a philanthropist, she would have been long known to grateful Loughborough artisans as a 'respectable' Byron by marriage (1815) and as a Noel-Wentworth Chatelaine by birth. Descended from noted Whig families - the Milbankes and the Noels - Lady Byron was first cousin to the worldly Lord Melbourne, soon to become Whig Prime Minister in 1834; and, after 1837, the mentor of Queen Victoria. His indiscreet wife lady Caroline Lamb, once the illicit lover of Byron, had died in 1828.

The 7th Lord Byron, George Anson, a naval officer, was persuaded by Annabella to champion the Co-operative cause for the social improvement of dockworkers and sailors in Liverpool. Annabella, later Baroness Wentworth in her own right, remained the 'Dowager Baroness' of Rochdale from 1824-58. All Lady Byron's family wards, the four illegitimately-descended Noel brothers, recognised but unjustly barred by law from Lord Wentworth's wealth, had become Co-operative enthusiasts by 1830. The eldest contributed as a Radical poet voicing Co-operative moral protest. His brother, Charles Noel, unselfishly taught the children of illiterate Leicestershire labourers and advised on Co-op projects while working as the Kirkby Mallory estate agent. Robert Noel, eventually rising to major in the Leicester militia, enthusiastically visited Societies and ventures across the country including the Ralahine Co-operative Community in Ireland. A protege of John Finch, he was a prominent enthusiast at Co-operative Congresses. Edward Noel,

the last sibling, finally departed damp Leicester climes in 1831 to launch a Co-operative-style rural development scheme on the Greek island of Euboea - a truly Byronic gesture generously funded by Lady Byron herself.

### **Sponsor of the Original North West CWS**

Actively involved for some 20 years with Co-operative Societies, and constantly sharing their social ideals, Lady Byron was at the heart of the Georgian Movement. Her close circle included not only Dr. William King but also the cultivated linguist Philip Skene (secretly 30th Laird, Skene of Skene), a great Co-operative enthusiast and gifted friend of Robert Owen. between 1829-32, Philip Skene introduced William King's conception of retail co-operatives into France (Marseilles), Italy (Florence), Germany (Saxony) and probably Austria-Hungary. Of the 500 British and Irish Societies promoted between 1828-34, covering perhaps up to 200,000 household individuals, a significant proportion were located within a 25 mile radius of Loughborough. In the industrial heartland of North West England, then distant by stagecoach from Loughborough, Lady Byron had been nominally Lady of the Manor of Rochdale (from 1815-23, before the family estate had been sold for £23,000 by the exiled Byron). Once a remote patrician figure, she became a vital source of encouragement and financial support during the 1830s to struggling Co-operators throughout the Manchester-Salford-Rochdale localities. The legendary Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society of 1844 was, in many indirect ways, a variant offspring of Georgian early experiments such as the lively Rochdale Co-operative Society (1830-2). In 1832 Lady Byron encouraged the Rochdale society to try and co-ordinate the manufacture and distribution of the varied wool products emanating from the pioneering societies in Rochdale, Huddersfield, Halifax and Bradford, Leicester and Loughborough. The Birkacre Society, mustering some 3,000 members (1832), was affiliated to a unique self-governed Manchester cotton enterprise in calico printing chronicled by the persecuted William Carson (Trustee of the Georgian North West CWS) in intelligence reports to his rescuer and patroness.

At national level, Lady Byron and Dr. King were influential

behind the scenes of the seven Co-operative Congresses of retail and producer societies convened between 1831-5; six of them staged charismatically with Robert Owen as an honorary chairman. Ahead of her time as a Christian Socialist, Lady Byron discreetly met the great secular Co-operator, Robert Owen, three times over 1829-30 to bridge their religious gulfs, policy gaps and ideological differences. She was successful, with Owen's own noble assent, in persuading the Co-operative Congress to dissociate Co-operation from any sectarian religious attachments or millennialist political cults; and in particular to detach Georgian Societies publicly from the controversial para-theological beliefs and impolitic large-scale ambitions of Robert Owen. Assured at the April 1832 London Congress that the fledgling CWS (launched in 1831) would remain a marketing investment well outside the immediate orbit of Robert Owen's influence, Lady Byron promised delegates the indispensable loan for Wholesale-trade expansion. Voluntarily shouldered by the courageous and loyal Huddersfield Society after the trading wind-down of the infant CWS ('North West of England Co-operative Company') in 1835, the debt was repaid to her (with interest) by 1838.

### **A Co-operative Banker**

Secretive and altruistic, it is far from easy to summarise the full banking transactions of Lady Byron. At one point, Dr. William King was offered "several hundreds" a year to distribute to Societies *carte blanche* through a special Drummonds 'Co-operative account'. William Thompson (who bequeathed his own landed fortune to communitarian Co-operation), privately testified that the self-effacing widow and Co-operative philanthropist, by encouraging ever-growing numbers of retail societies, had placed herself by 1831, "in the habit of distributing yearly large sums of money - thousands - to relieve the ever-rising distress". Wisely, however, Lady Byron had withheld granting weighty support towards any projected high-risk agricultural 'incipient community' until the expanding network of retail societies achieved maturity. In effect, Lady Byron was not just a discriminating venture analyst but also a shrewd development banker to the Movement. Lady Byron consulted Dr. King at every point upon Co-operative ventures, donations,

seed investments and loans: with significantly-timed and sizeable financial assistance provided for at least 43 documented Co-operative Society projects extending (in England) from Brighton to Carlisle and Durham. As the Loughborough letter in part affirms, Lady Annabella Byron, once known as the estranged-widow of the 6th baron Byron of Rochdale, had become popularly acclaimed nationwide as the 'Godmother of the Co-operative Movement'. Understandably, at the Liverpool Co-operative Congress (1832) the delegates endlessly cheered a special resolution recording for posterity the formal gratitude of all Co-operators to Lady Byron and Dr. King, for their unparalleled encouragement and personal contributions to the young Movement.

### **A College Foreseen: 1832**

Kirkby Mallory was graced with a thriving Co-operative society founded in 1830. Lady Byron simultaneously founded (1830) a progressive village school, eventually employing as the incumbent master Matthew Hirst (son of the 1832 Co-operative Congress President), a Co-operative School product and trained-teacher, later renowned as a model Welsh Headmaster. Local artisans and labourers were to be offered an alternative to the negativity and despair expressed in the firing of Nottingham Castle; some immediate self-improvement, and with education, hopefully ventures which would provide a staircase towards 'incipient' Community. Mallory Hall, however, was never destined to be the forerunner to Stanford Hall, the post-1945 jewel in the educational crown of the Movement.

Lady Byron, like Robert Owen, increasingly believed in the necessity for an academy to provide thinkers and leaders for the new Co-operative Movement. The Pathbreaking Hofwyl School, founded in democratic Switzerland by Phillipe de Fellenberg (1771-1844), was taken as the educational ideal. This renowned non-sectarian boys 'School of Industry', spanning social classes and countries, nurtured Co-operative ideals and practices. A cradle of international Co-operation, Robert Owen's sons, Lady Byron's wards and William Channing's American offspring were educated there, acquiring intellectual and manual skills alongside

the offspring of European Royalty and children of very modest origins. The intellectual promoter of German Co-operation, Professor Victor Huber (1800-69), was an early pupil. But in the short run the huge endowment necessary for a British Co-operative Academy could not be raised from the existing structures of unstable retail societies. The likely intellectual nucleus, the British Association for Promoting Co-operative Knowledge (1829-33) with a peak membership of 750, splintered and evolved into the vanguard of the Chartist movement.

Lady Byron, Middlesex-seated but seasonally resident in Brighton, first conceived the project of a £2,000-endowed "Co-operative College" (so-phrased) to promote the Co-operative Cause in 1831; to be located not in badly-connected Leicestershire but in the Great West Road vicinity of London. Dr. William King was invited to become the inaugural College principal; a Co-operator with high qualifications as Brighton mechanics Institute and school promoter, as a founder of *The Co-operator* and the Pathbreaking 1828 Brighton Society, and as an accomplished mathematician (Twelfth Wrangler) and social philosopher; with over ten years College experience as a Fellow of Peterhouse, Cambridge. King, however, justly proud of his rare repute as a practising Cambridge Doctor of medicine (Edinburgh doctorates were then commonplace), ultimately preferred to combine Co-operative endeavours with a Sussex general practice and family harmony. By 1832, the year of the Reform Act, both King and Lady Byron had fastened securely upon basic full-childhood education as the *sine qua non* of future economic self-help advances and the eventual democratisation of the surrounding polity. The famous Salford Co-operative School model promised more for Co-operation, so it seemed, than the Manchester College/Dissenting Academy model, although perhaps both were needed. In 1834, Lady Byron indefinitely deferred the Collegiate ambition, founding instead a more modest progressive 'Co-operative School', near the East India Company Asylum in Ealing, genteelly aired as the Grove School to thwart establishment suspicion. E.T. Craig, organiser of the famed Ralahine Co-operative Community in Ireland, was recruited to become the opening headmaster. At least two sons of (Yorkshire) Co-operators became boarders. An evening school (recruiting Acton Co-operators) was opened for adults in 1835.

## The Loughborough Letter: 1832

The Loughborough letter to Lady Byron was written in September 1832 at the peak of her popularity and influence. Her major victories, including the proto-CWS reform, had been won at the third Congress, the epochal April 1832 London Congress, where the 'pro-Christian' cabal moved discreetly for six days between the assembly hall at Robert Owen's Gray's Inn Road Institution and the headquarters Lady Byron shared with Dr. King at the 'Co-operative suite' in Brown's Hotel, owned by a former servant of Lady Byron. (Brown's still boasts a fine table belonging to Lord Byron). A greater election victory, however, would soon follow with the Presidency of the Liverpool Co-operative Congress (October 1832), awarded to a remarkable workingman, a leader representing the non-Owenite camp; Thomas Hirst of Huddersfield, publicly committed as a Christian-Co-operator, an open protege of Lady Byron and a close friend of John Skevington.

At the successful Liverpool Congress Bazaar attracting hundreds, a marketing event sponsored by Lady Byron herself, fine-quality hosiery from the Loughborough Society was freely displayed and quickly sold. A Business cynic might therefore be tempted to view the Loughborough gift and letter as perhaps the commercial foreshadow of a special sales strategy. 'As Worn by the Byrons' would indeed have made a wonderful recommendation to any Co-operative buyer! But, to the detached social historian, the short and inarticulate letter is far more profound. It aptly expresses the deep emotions and noble ideals of selfless men and women engaged in the greatest social experiment of their era.

The transcribed document is delightfully evocative:-

*Co-operative Stores,  
Top of the Market Place,  
Loughborough,  
September 14th 1832*

*To the Honourable Lady Noel Byron*

*Madam*

*I hope you will excuse the liberty I take in addressing you which I do at the request of the Loughborough Co-operative Society who having hored of your kindness to their brethren of the working class in different parts venture you to accept the inclosed trifle as a testimony of their admiration of your virtues and as a proof that there is a feeling of simply for each other among the working classes & that they are not destitute of gratitude towards those that come forward to assist them in their distress. They could have sent articles of greater value but thought that something that was the production of one of their own body would be more acceptable.*

*Hoping you will excuse any imperfection in the style etc. of these lines.*

*I remain in behalf of the above Society your Ladyship's obedient servant.*

*John Skevington*

*NB One pair for yourself. Another for your Ladyship's daughter.*

**John Corina is currently a Research Professor, engaged in writing up the life of Robert Owen.**

A UNIQUE HERITAGE DOCUMENT

Co-operative Stores  
Top of the Market Place.  
Loughborough Sept 14<sup>th</sup>  
1832

To the Honourable Lady Abel Byron

Madam I hope you will excuse the Liberty I take  
in addressing you which I do at the request of the  
Loughborough Co-operative Society who having heard  
of your kindness to their members of the working class  
in different parts venture to request you to accept the  
inclosed trifle as a testimony of their admiration of  
your virtues and as a proof that there is a feeling of  
sympathy for each other among the working classes &  
that they are not destitute of gratitude towards  
them that come forward to assist them in their dis-  
tress they could have sent articles of greater value  
but thought that something that was the production  
of one of their own body would be more acceptable  
hoping you will excuse any imperfection in the  
style &c of these lines  
I remain in behalf of the above  
Society your Ladyship's Obedt Servant  
John Skidmore

Yours one heir for yourself  
brother for your Ladyship's  
Daughter

LOUGHBOROUGH AND LADY BYRON  
AN 1832 LETTER

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