



JAN. 67

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Lady Caroline Lamb, impetuous, imaginative and excitable. She tore her wedding gown and had to be carried away in a dead faint. A reproduction of a painting by courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.

Sir Matthew Lamb soon after he had acquired it. Normally it was at Bocket that the Melbournes lived, though they also had a fine town house. At Bocket, in healthy and peaceful country surroundings, they brought up their six children. Peniston, the eldest son, disappointed his father by dying at a comparatively early age. William, born in 1779 and his mother's favourite, then became heir to the estate and to the title. There was a third son, Frederick, better known as Lord Beauvale, who later carved out a successful career for himself in the diplomatic service. One of the two daughters died young, but the other, Emily (1787-1869), married twice—first Earl Cowper and then, after a brief widowhood,

# The romance of William and Caroline Lamb

**N**O blue blood flowed in the veins of the Lambs, and they had no proud or aristocratic forebears. Their emergence from obscurity was largely due to the money-making ability of Penistone Lamb, an astute Nottingham attorney. When he died in 1734 he had amassed a fortune of £100,000, which he left to his nephew Matthew Lamb, who made such good use of his inheritance that eventually it was increased tenfold. Matthew in 1746 purchased Bocket Hall in central Hertfordshire and the 500 acres of land on which it stood. In 1755 he was created a baronet.

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Sir Matthew and his wife had three children, including a son, Peniston, who when his father died in 1768 succeeded to the family fortune and the title. Peniston appears to have been a very ordinary person, semi-literate and possessing only one obvious talent—for squandering the money that his predecessors had acquired by their hard work and professional skill. Wealth, however, is a universal passport and opened many doors to him that would otherwise have remained shut. In 1781 he became first Viscount Mel-

bourne, and was found a place in Parliament, which he attended for over forty years without once making a speech!

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For all his mediocrity Melbourne had been remarkably fortunate in his marriage, for his wife, *née* Elizabeth Milbanke, was a woman of intelligence and character, who charmed everyone with whom she came into contact. Lady Melbourne was not only beautiful but of a practical nature, and could do anything from managing the estate at Bocket to planning a friend's or relative's political career. She was also ambitious, and constituted the driving force that gradually raised the family to a position of power and prestige.

## THE HERTFORDSHIRE HOME

The Melbournes were well pleased with Bocket Hall, the elegant brick mansion that had been completely rebuilt by the famous architect James Paine, under the direction of

Lord Palmerston—and lived to a ripe old age.

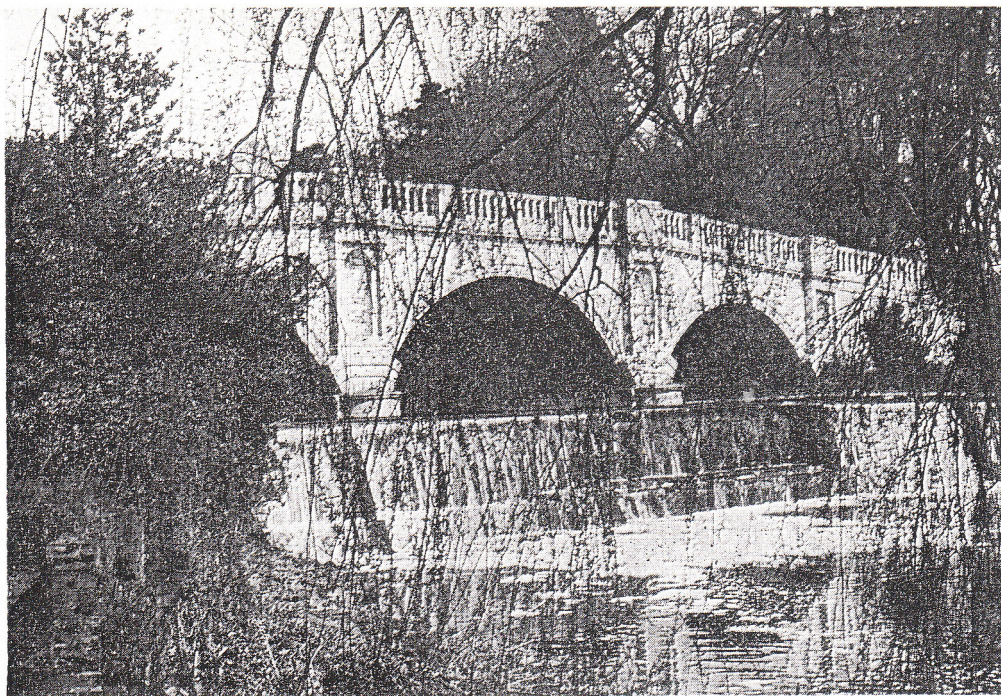
The head of the family, as we have seen, was a somewhat stupid, feckless character, fond of hunting and drinking, who left all major decisions to his wife and accepted her dominance, as well as her infidelities, with resigned patience. Life at Bocket was nevertheless pleasant enough. Lady Melbourne, with her admiring friends and children, who all adored her, rode gaily about the park on horseback. Periodically there were parties and banquets, when the rooms of the stately mansion were full of high-spirited conversation and laughter.

## MEMORIES OF BROCKET HALL (1)

by Rudolph Robert



**Paine's Palladian bridge, which, with its waterfall, is one of the most attractive features of Bocket Park. Photograph by Rudolph Robert.**



It was on one of these festive occasions that William Lamb, a serious young man of twenty-one, first became acquainted with Lady Bessborough's daughter Caroline, an impetuous, imaginative and excitable child of fourteen, whose personality and elfin beauty impressed him deeply. He, with his equable temperament and manly good looks, had a like effect on her. Marriage, of course, did not enter the thoughts of either at that time, but the attraction was already there, tacitly admitted and destined to grow stronger.

#### ETON AND CAMBRIDGE

The early education of William Lamb, the future Lord Melbourne and prime minister, began simply enough in a Hertfordshire village school. Though a clever boy, he did not work very hard at his lessons, preferring to stare out of the windows and watch what was going on in the fields. Later, when nine years of age, he left Bocket for Eton, with ten guineas in his pocket and the blessing of his brilliant mother, who had already decided that he was the most talented of her six children and with a little pushing on her part would go far. At Eton William appears to have adjusted himself to the public-school routine—with its floggings, fisticuffs and other severities—easily enough. Eight years later he went to Cambridge, where, as at Bocket and Eton, he displayed a greater liking for the pursuit of pleasure than for

learning. Nevertheless, he read widely and developed that taste for the classics of literature that was to last and sustain him to the end of his life. At Cambridge, too, he began to display a more positive interest in politics and public affairs, and distinguished himself by winning the prize in a competition for oratory. This brought him to the notice of Charles James Fox, the Whig statesman, who was himself an eloquent speaker and debater. It was just after leaving Cambridge that, on a visit to Bocket, he met Caroline Ponsonby, the girl with the golden hair and irrepressible flow of conversation, as already related.



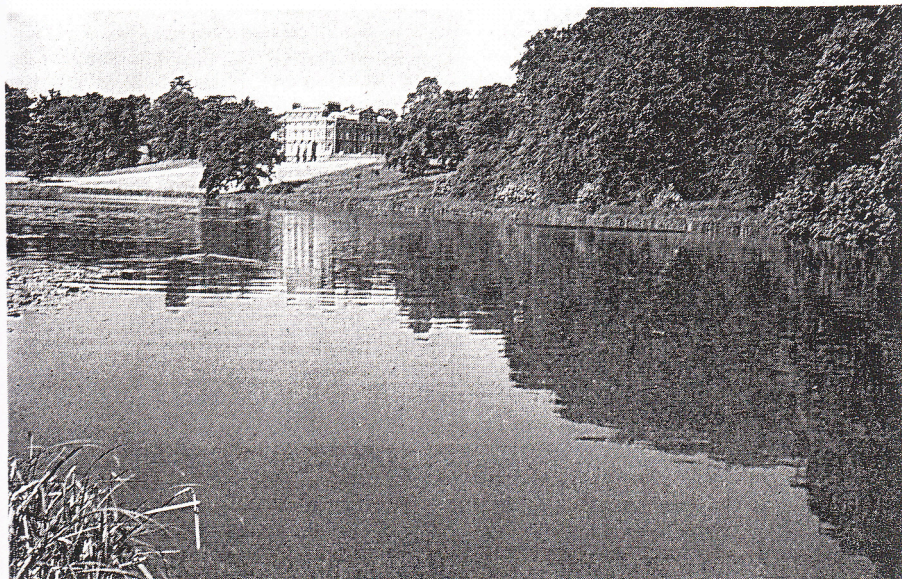
However, William's mother did not consider her son's education was yet finished. She arranged for him and his brother Frederick to be sent to Glasgow University,

where, for the first time, he was forced into unrelenting study. Later, when he had returned to Bocket, the question of a career had to be faced. After some hesitation he decided to become a lawyer, and in 1804 was admitted to the Bar.

In the following year his elder brother, Peniston, died and he became the legal heir.

#### MARRIAGE

Caroline Ponsonby had by then developed into a sophisticated young woman of nineteen, and the more William saw of her the more he was dazzled by her ethereal charm plus her cleverness, wit, warmth and physical vitality. Yet she was a frail, slight person, known to her friends as "Ariel" or the "Fairy Queen," and in appearance still very much the child he had met at the Bocket Hall party. He knew, of course, that there was another side to her character, that she liked having her own way and when thwarted would lose her temper and abuse those about her with uncontrollable fury. Everyone knew of her neurotic tendencies, but it made no difference to William, who soon after the improvement in his prospects wrote to Caroline declaring that he had loved her "deeply, dearly and faithfully" for several



**A view of Bocket Hall across the artificial lake created by damming the River Lea, which flows through the park. It was on a festive occasion held at the Hall that William Lamb and Caroline Ponsonby first became acquainted. Photograph by Rudolph Robert.**





**Brocket Hall, acquired by Sir Matthew Lamb in 1746 and completely rebuilt by the famous architect James Paine. It was here that the first Lord and Lady Melbourne brought up their six children.**  
Photograph by Rudolph Robert.

years. A few days later—with the approval of Lady Bessborough, her mother—she accepted his proposal and they became engaged.

There is no doubt about their happiness in the days that followed, despite some differences of opinion between the prospective mothers-in-law, and the preparations for the wedding went ahead with little to mar the serenity of the young couple. Only as the day of the ceremony approached did Caroline, her nerves at breaking point, reveal the tempestuous, hysterical side of her nature. At the close of the wedding service she found fault with the officiating bishop, tore her gown in anger, and had to be carried away in a dead faint.

William, full of solicitude, bore off his bride to the gracious Hertfordshire park in which their honeymoon was to be spent. It was midsummer, with the water foaming white under the arches of the Palladian bridge and the cuckoo calling from among the lush foliage of the trees. At Brocket Caroline recovered; the brilliant June sunshine dissipated her mood of melancholy and she was herself again—bewitching, tender, gay, galloping round the park like a

tomboy, painting watercolours, and listening while William read aloud from his favourite poets.

#### ENTRY INTO POLITICS

He was then twenty-six, and in the following year, under pressure from Lady Melbourne and his friends, decided to take up a career in politics. In January 1806 he made his entry into the House of Commons as the member for Leominster and eventually, after various vicissitudes, was elected as M.P. for the Hertford constituency. All through this period, however, he displayed little of political conviction or zeal. His attendances at the House were irregular, and critics declared that there was a "streak of idleness" in William Lamb's nature and that he would never rise to any high position.

Nevertheless, the Whig aristocracy thought highly of him, admitted him into their conclaves and marked him as at least a possible leader. When his father died in 1828 William became the second viscount and shortly afterwards was offered, and accepted, the home secretaryship. He became prime minister for the first time in 1834, at the age of fifty-five.

## Village planning in Hertfordshire

Report by Anthony Snow, A.R.I.B.A.,  
(P.R.O., Hertfordshire Chapter of  
Architects)

MR. ERNEST DOUBLEDAY, the county planning officer, recently addressed the Hertfordshire Chapter of Architects at St. Albans on the subject of village planning in Hertfordshire. He was introduced by Mr. Derek Phillips, the chairman of the chapter, as previously being planning officer for Warwick and who, controversially, did not believe in producing plans for villages.

Mr. Doubleday outlined the background to the county's planning problems, pointing out that since he came to the county in 1947 as its first planning officer the population had increased by 400,000—an exceptional increase even for the south-east. Despite this increase, however, the county was still 67 per cent rural, in comparison with the pre-war figure of 72 per cent. This had been achieved by the policy of new towns and the large London County Council housing development at Boreham Wood and Oxhey, and had led to a policy pursued by the county for preserving its villages intact as far as possible. Villages were now designated as excluded, listed and green belt, each category having its size and future expansion controlled on an *ad hoc* basis by the county planning department. Villages did not have development plans, and this allowed proposals to be blocked when necessary, as the existence of a development plan inevitably led to the designated area being rapidly infilled by speculative building. Mr. Doubleday also described the success that had been achieved in preservation of old buildings and the formation of village trusts to maintain them.

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In the ensuing discussion many points were raised and Mr. Doubleday successfully defended himself against various forms of attack. It was unfortunate that he did not answer a question relating to the depredations caused by his colleague in widening roads through villages so that they become fast through-ways; this policy seems to run absolutely contrary to Mr. Doubleday's own declared policy and is one of the major causes of the decline of many of the villages in the county. Much was said about the decline of village life and the lack of social cohesion, and the discussion ended with a heart-felt plea from a guest, a doctor practising in the county, who said that lack of social structure in villages had led to mental sickness in the inhabitants, particularly the old.



## Look at the past

### Brocket Hall's history

BROCKET HALL dates from Tudor times and takes its name from Sir John Brocket who built the first house at Lemsford.

In 1746 the estate was bought by Sir Matthew Lamb of Derbyshire, who demolished the house and replaced it with the present, stately home.

The world famous Capability Brown landscaped the gardens and the river Lea was dammed to make a lake. A stone bridge was constructed over the water.

In the days of the Prince Regent, early in the 19th century, there was a racecourse at Brocket Hall.

The Bocket Cup was one of the most popular events on the racing calendar.

Brocket Hall is now a conference centre. But it still remains most famous for its links with Lady Caroline Lamb.

# CAROLINE — BAD, MAD AND LOVELY

LADY Caroline Lamb was really a tiger.

She was fierce, beautiful, wild and stunning. But she was also laced with lunacy.

Madness ran through the veins of her slender body, so small and attractive that she was nicknamed Ariel and the Fairy Queen.

She was born the daughter of an earl and countess in 1785. Part of her childhood was spent in Italy.

But Caroline was often neglected because of her mother's illness and left to fend for herself along with a house full of cousins in London.

She taught herself ancient and modern languages and became educated to a high degree.

Many were enchanted by the lovely tomboy. But her grandmother was so concerned about her personality that she asked a doctor to assess Caroline for insanity.

Rumours of her fierce unpredictable temper were already spreading through society when she became engaged to William Lamb, heir to Bocket Hall at Lemsford.

Caroline's fraught nerves broke at the wedding and she tore her

dress in a fury over the service and then collapsed in a faint.

William took her home to Bocket Hall. Although deeply in love they were happy for only a little while before Caroline's fragile temper began to drive them apart.

Two years after their wedding, in 1807, Caroline had a son. But as the years passed he proved as unstable as his mother.

William, who had trained as a lawyer, was now an MP. But only an award for oratory at Cambridge University gave any hint of the glory to follow in later years.

Affairs were commonplace in Regency England. When Caro-

By SUE FISHER

line met the notorious Lord Byron in 1812 she saw no reason to be chaste.

Byron was already famed as a daring poet and lover. He was lionised by a society which found his sinister reputation fascinating.

So did Caroline. She fell heavily in love with Lord Byron.

And her infatuation was returned. How could the gallant adventurer fail to adore so lovely, so fragile, so individual a femme fatale?

The die was cast. See next week for part two of the story of Byron and Caroline Lamb, which ended in tragedy at the gates of Bocket Hall.



● Palatial — Bocket Hall in 1786, engraved by the artist Fittler.



● William Lamb engraved by S. Freeman.



● Caroline Lamb in 1819, by Henry Meyer.



● Lord Byron in 1813, pictured by R. Westall.



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(2 sheets)

**HERTFORDSHIRE**  
**Countryside**

# Review

October 1990

and The County Diary

## *Hertfordshire's Literary Connections*

### Lady Caroline Lamb at Brocket Hall

DAVID CARROLL

LADY CAROLINE LAMB'S famous assessment of Byron, that he was "mad, bad and dangerous to know" was, to some extent, a classic case of the pot calling the kettle black. Caroline Ponsonby, daughter of the 3rd Earl of Bessborough and his wife, the former Lady Henrietta Spencer, had shown herself to be unusual child almost from her birth, in November 1785. She was sent to live in Italy at the age of three, after her mother suffered a slight stroke and, when she returned to England six years later, was brought up by her.... devoted yet somehow ineffective grandmother, Lady Spencer, in the nurseries of that gilded birdcage, Devonshire House." However, Lady Spencer became sufficiently concerned about Caroline's eccentric behaviour and wildly erratic temperament, to consult a doctor, who recommended "that she be treated delicately, and allowed to do more or less what she liked."

Throughout her life, Caroline Lamb was unpredictable and unstable, careering between bouts of unnatural gaiety and fits of deep depression, and leaving in her wake a trail of human debris; most notably in the person of her long-suffering and loving husband, William Lamb. Later, as Lord Melbourne, (and after his wife's death), he became the young Queen Victoria's Prime Minister and closest adviser.

Nowadays, Brocket Hall at Lemsford, near Welwyn, is a Conference Centre. The original house, built by Sir John Brocket, dated from Tudor times, but it was demolished during the mid-eighteenth century and replaced by the present building, when Sir

It was to this palatial residence, with its gardens landscaped by 'Capability' Brown, that twenty-six year-old William Lamb brought his nineteen year-old wife, Caroline, for their honey-moon in June 1805.

The couple had first met at Brocket Hall when Caroline was only thirteen, and visiting the house in which William Lamb spent much of his childhood. Six years later, but only after his elder brother, Peniston, had died, leaving William heir to the family title and fortune, ("for the only daughter of the Earl of Bessborough must aim at higher game than the second son of a nouveau riche Irish viscount"), they married. Even their wedding-day was clouded by one of Caroline's tantrums, and provided William with a fair example of what he could expect to endure over the next twenty years or so. For no apparent reason, and to the astonishment of the bridegroom and assembled guests Caroline began shouting at the bishop who was conducting the service, before ripping her wedding-gown and collapsing in an hysterical swoon.

What Caroline Lamb lacked in physical stature - she was of a short and slight build - she repaid in ample measure with the emotional havoc she wreaked upon those closest to her. William, who remained a loyal and devoted husband almost until the end of her comparatively brief life, experienced only fleeting moments of peace and happiness with her. The birth of their only child, in August 1807, might have provided William with some comfort; but the boy, Augustus, was mentally handicapped, and only added to William's already crushing burden.

might easily have meandered on without attracting any great public attention, were it not for the events of 1812. The poet, Byron, had become an overnight sensation with the publication of the first two cantos of 'Childe Harold'. After reading the poem herself, Caroline declared that she must meet its author, and an introduction was arranged at the London home of Lady Holland, in March. Within a few weeks, Caroline and Byron had embarked upon an affair that was as brief as it was turbulent and passionate.

Despite their intense attraction towards each other, however, their personalities clashed violently, and it could only be a matter of time before the relationship crumbled. By November, Byron was writing to a friend that ".....the connection with Lady Caroline Lamb is completely broken off." In this, as in all things, Caroline's response was absurdly melodramatic. "You have told me how foreign women revenge," she wrote to him. "I will show you how an Englishwoman can."

....unpredictable and unstable, careering between bouts of unnatural gaiety and fits of deep depression and leaving in her wake a trail of human debris

In fact, the deed fell far short of the threat. She rode madly on the turnpike to Bocket" where, after gathering up some of the local village girls from Welwyn, and dressing them in white, she lit a bonfire and burnt copies - although, rather shrewdly, not the originals - of Byron's letters to her. She also consigned to the flames a copy of the poet's portrait, while the girls danced round the fire chanting an eerie verse which Caroline had written specially for the occasion:

'Ah, look not thus on me, so grave, so sad,' it concluded.

'Shake not your heads, nor say

Although their affair was soon over, Caroline Lamb pestered Byron for several years afterwards, and the poet grew to loathe her. "I begin to look upon her as actually mad," he wrote in exasperation.

Byron left England in 1816, never to return alive. In May of the same year, Caroline's first novel, 'Glenarvon', was published. Written at Brocket Hall, mainly in haste and by candlelight, and without Williams's knowledge, it was a thinly disguised and scathing satire upon the people amongst whom she moved, sparing neither her husband nor her mother-in-law in the process. The eponymous hero, to whom...she ascribed murder, kidnapping and a few seductions" was based, perhaps inevitably, on Byron.

Byron took the characterisation lightly. "As for the likeness, the picture can't be good," he wrote; "I did not sit long enough." For William, the book was a final humiliation, the last straw, and he insisted upon a Deed of Separation. On the very day that his lawyers travelled to Bocket, however, to obtain the necessary signatures for the document, Caroline persuaded him to a reconciliation.

Caroline Lamb published two further novels. 'Graham Hamilton' appeared in 1822 and 'Ada Reis' in 1823. Both of them were written with William's knowledge and assistance, but neither met with the great success enjoyed by 'Glenarvon'. This was really her auto-biography, and written in the white heat of passion.

After the final break with Byron, Caroline spent most of her time at Bocket Hall. Like William, she loved the place, and the peace she found on their Hertfordshire estate held a greater attraction for her than London society' which was, in any case, increasingly ostracizing her. Years of outrageous behaviour, overlaid by the publication of 'Glenarvon', were having their effect.

However, all was far from sweetness and light at Bocket. William came and went, immersing himself in politics and

*Concluded on next page*



*The Great Composers*

# RACHMANINOV

## The Tortured Genius

*By courtesy of WH Smith*

"MUSIC is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music."

This was the credo of the brilliant pianist and composer, Sergei Rachmaninov, who had been born into a wealthy, aristocratic Russian family on April 1, 1873. Tragically, the boy's father squandered the family fortune and left Sergei to be brought up by his mother in a St Petersburg flat.

She managed to secure his musical education but, despite perfect pitch and brilliant playing, he was a lazy student and made little progress until, in his early teens, he met Tchaikovsky, who encouraged him.

Still only 21, Rachmaninov composed the Prelude in C sharp minor for piano, which became his most famous work. Obligated to play it at all his concerts, it eventually annoyed him that this piece remained more popular than greater works composed later.

His restless intense First Symphony, written when he was 24 was dedicated to Anna Lodizhensky, a young married woman for whom he had a passion. This passion didn't communicate itself to the critics of its first performance, who called it "meaningless...strained .....and perverse". It cannot have helped that Glazunov, who conducted the debut, was drunk. "I felt like a man who had suffered a stroke," declared Rachmaninov, immediately withdrawing the symphony. It was not rediscovered or appreciated until after his death.

The same fate befell much of Rachmaninov's work. His genius as a pianist was appreciated, but his compositions were scorned. Richard Strauss spoke of them as "sentimental swill" while Stravinsky sneeringly dubbed them "magnificent film music". Little wonder that Rachmaninov once groaned, "I have never been able to decide where my real vocation lies to be a composer, pianist or conductor."

Despite his creative depression, the young man's sense of humour came to the fore in 1898, when he

friend, the opera singer Chaliapin, and arranged to have the newly married couple serenaded at six in the morning by an improvised band playing household implements, conducted by Rachmaninov himself.

During an 1899 visit to England, playing and conducting, he promised a new Piano Concerto for the London Philharmonic Society, but found himself unable to complete it. In desperation he consulted Nikolay Dahl, a celebrated Moscow doctor, skilled in medical use of hypnosis. The results were successful and when the Second Piano Concerto was published in 1900, it bore a dedication to the hypnotist.

The happiest ten years of Rachmaninov's life followed his marriage in 1902 to his cousin, Natalia Batina, who bore him two daughters. It was in this happy time that he wrote his Third Piano Concerto, Second Symphony and much more.

When Rachmaninov foresaw the imminent Russian Revolution, he realised that as wealthy, landowning aristocrats, he and his family would have to leave the country or suffer the wrath of the peasants. In 1917, they fled to Sweden on the pretext of a concert tour, and never returned.

Soon after, they moved to New York, and Rachmaninov set about the serious business of making money to support his family. As performing and recording provided the best income, he was forced to virtually abandon composition.

The piano manufacturers, Steinway, made Rachmaninov's life on tour in America very comfortable. They provided him with a railway carriage complete with a piano, sleeping accommodation and servants, so he did not have to live in hotels.

Despite his success, he was still plagued by self doubts, and suffered pains in his head and back which he attributed to the strain of overwork.

During this period, Rachmaninov cut several piano rolls for the Ampico company. When he listened back to his first piano roll, he was apparently

unimpressed but, just as he was leaving he said, "Gentlemen, I have just heard myself play." Fortunately, these piano rolls have now been transferred to compact disc, providing a magnificent legacy, and one of the earliest examples of a great composer playing his own works.

In 1931, after putting his name to an anti-Soviet manifesto in The New York Times, Rachmaninov's music was banned in Russia, and Pravda described him as "played out long ago ... an insignificant imitator and reactionary."

True, he was out of step with 20th century trends in composition, represented by Prokofiev and Stravinsky. "I simply write down the music I hear in myself, as naturally as possible," he explained. He was happy to admit that his music owed more to the romantic style of the previous century, but this did not stop his Second Piano Concerto stirring the hearts of millions who heard it in the film Brief Encounter. Nor did it deter pop singer Eric Carmen from borrowing a theme from the same concerto as the melody of his hit All By Myself, which reached No2 on the American charts in 1976.

By the end of his career, Rachmaninov was wealthy, owning property in America, France and Switzerland, but his frail health meant that at a February 1943 concert in Knoxville, Tennessee, the great man had to be guided to his piano by unseen hands behind the curtain.

Collapsing immediately after, Rachmaninov was admitted to a hospital in Los Angeles, where cancer was diagnosed. Realising he was to die, he looked at his hands and murmured, "My dear hands. Farewell, my poor hands."

He died at home in Beverley Hills, California, on March 28, 1943.

### RECOMMENDED RECORDINGS AVAILABLE FROM MOST LARGER WH SMITH STORES

Rachmaninov plays Rachmaninov  
Decca 425 964-2  
Piano Concerto No 2 Ashkenazy  
Decca 4177022  
Piano Concerto No 1&4  
Ashkenazy Decca 4250042  
Symphony No 2  
Pickwick P CD 904  
Greatest Hits  
RCA GD89282

Continued from previous page

anything else that would remove him from his wife's presence, while Caroline - whose health was steadily deteriorating, and not being improved by large doses of laudanum and brandy - created havoc amongst the Bocket Hall servants. The long-suffering butler, Hagard, was prepared to overlook Caroline's tantrums because, like William, he regarded her more as a fractious child than as an adult. The younger members of the household staff, however, were less tolerant, causing one neighbour to observe that ".....the servants at Bocket.....pass through like figures in a magic lantern."

Although her affair with Byron was a thing of the past, there were dark hints that Caroline was still not entirely faithful to her husband. Her last great attachment, within a few years of her death, was to Bulwer-Lytton, then in his early twenties and only half her age. His family seat at Knebworth House was only a short ride from Bocket.

Byron died at Missolonghi in April 1824, and Caroline was devastated by the news. "I am very sorry I ever said one unkind word against him," she lamented. But even worse was to follow in June when, walking with William near the gates of Bocket Park, she saw an impressive funeral procession moving slowly along the Great North Road, close to the estate. On enquiry, she learned that Byron's remains were being taken north to the family vault at Hucknall Torkard church, near Newstead Abbey.

Caroline's decline accelerated after Byron's death. Patient and supportive towards her until almost the very end, William insisted upon another Deed of Separation, which was put into effect during the summer of 1825. Caroline agreed to leave Bocket, although with great regret.

"Without a friend, without a home,

I sit beneath my favourite tree," she wrote, melodramatically, while waiting to depart.

Arrangements had been made for her to live in a small house in London but, before long she was back at Bocket Hall, with only her father-in-law for company. William had taken the precaution of moving elsewhere. By the autumn of 1827, however, she was seriously ill with dropsy, and by Christmas she was obviously dying. Caroline asked to see her husband, who was then living in Ireland. "He is the only person who never failed me," she whispered. William rushed to Bocket Hall, where he spent long days at his wife's bedside. She died - at the age of forty-three - on 26th January 1828, and was buried in Hatfield Churchyard.



# A bonfire of Byron's letters

by Rudolph Robert

THE marriage of William Lamb and Caroline Ponsonby in the summer of 1805 was one of those disastrous unions doomed from the very first to unhappiness and failure. Caroline's nerve-storm after the London wedding ceremony proved to be the prelude to other uncontrollable, and even wilder, outbursts. William, who was kindly and indulgent to a degree, was loath to believe that his young wife might actually be insane, yet that suspicion had been present in the minds of her own family even when she was a child.

Born in 1785, Caroline was the only daughter of the third Earl of Bessborough, and had been sent at three years of age to Italy, with only a servant to look after her. On her return to England six years later she had joined her mother, also a most captivating woman, in the Bessboroughs' Cavendish

Square household. Caroline had become one of the "Devonshire House girls" and there, among her cousins, was educated in the style befitting her station as a nobleman's daughter. She absorbed all that was most refined in the culture of the period—its art, its music, its poetry. She moved continuously in an atmosphere of intellectual enlightenment and emotional tranquillity. All this should have had a stabilizing effect on her excitable nature, yet she developed in such an abnormal way that her grandmother, Lady Spencer, into whose care she passed, became worried and consulted a doctor to establish whether she was, or was not, mentally deranged.

The doctor's pronouncement is unknown, but it was probably of a non-committal and reassuring nature. Caroline grew up and married William Lamb, who before he became Viscount Melbourne had not been considered a suitable match for her, and whom she had therefore refused.

## INFATUATION

There had been a scene at the wedding, but for a time at least, while at Brocket, their married life was happy. Then, all too quickly, came the first rifts in the lute, the first misunderstandings, and the first quarrels. In 1807 their son, Augustus Lamb, was born—with little effect on their worsening relationship. Five years later, when Caroline met Lord Byron for the first time, it looked as if the ill-assorted marriage would break up in mutual disenchantment and dislike.



Byron, whose first two cantos of *Childe Harold* profoundly impressed literary London in 1812, swept Caroline completely off her feet. She managed to strike up an acquaintance with him, and presently tried to snatch him away from his other admirers and make him her own exclusive property. Knowing full well, as her diary testifies, that he was "mad, bad and dangerous," she yet allowed herself to become wildly infatuated—though it was probably more with his reputation than with his person. Byron, though handsome, had a club foot and was far from being the assured, polished man of the world that he pretended to be.

When it came to Caroline's ears that the poet had declared their friendship to be at an end, and that he was flirting with other women, the floodgates of hysteria were again

The old Great North Road wending its way through Lemsford village. It was here, at the top of the hill, that Lady Caroline Lamb met Byron's funeral cortege. Brocket Park lies on the right. Photograph by Rudolph Robert.





Lady Caroline Lamb became wildly infatuated with Lord Byron, although she knew him to be "mad, bad and dangerous." When her romantic illusions about the poet were rudely shattered she lit a bonfire in Bocket Park and burned his letters with a miniature portrait he had given her.

opened. Caroline fled with her broken heart to Bocket Hall, and kept William awake all night with her alternate lamentations and screams of jealous rage. When news came that Byron had proposed marriage to Lady Melbourne's niece, Annabella Milbanke, and when, further, he wrote to Caroline telling her bluntly to put a check on her vanity and to exert her caprices on others, the shock was so severe that the unfortunate lady completely lost control of herself.

The affair with Byron came to an end in 1813, and William Lamb, seeing his wife so tormented and irrational, came to the conclusion that their marriage was an utter failure and that he must seek a separation.

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#### THE BONFIRE

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It was while the legal formalities were in progress that Caroline wrote her first novel, *Glenarvon*, described as a "rhapsodical tale" in which she caricatured Byron as the heartless, fickle lover. The writing was done clandestinely and in strange circumstances: Caroline worked by candlelight in Bocket Hall at dead of night, and kept her labours a secret from everyone except a governess.

When Byron read *Glenarvon* he remarked that it would have been more entertaining if it had been more truthful. Later he condemned it roundly as a completely "insincere production," and scornfully dismissed the caricature of himself with the comment that the portrait was bound to be poor as he had "not sat for it very long"! Someone at once passed on his remarks to Lady Caroline, with the result that her romantic illusions about the poet were again rudely shattered. She lit a bonfire in Bocket Park and burned his letters and the miniature portrait he had given her.



Several girls from the village were brought in to witness the holocaust. Dressed in white garments, they were made to whirl round the flames in a fantastic dance, and to recite verses that Caroline had composed specially for the occasion. What the Lemsford damsels thought of the bizarre rigmarole in which they were participating can only be guessed. The ritual of the bonfire, as far as Caroline was concerned, seems to have had a cathartic



**Lord Byron, who after the publication of "Childe Harold" was acclaimed as "the most romantic figure of his age." Leaving England in 1816, he died of fever at Nissolonghi while fighting for the cause of Greek independence. By courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery.**

effect, but the period of emotional calm that followed proved to be very short-lived, for soon afterwards she was bombarding Byron with letters that were a fine mixture of flattery and abuse. They met again twice—the first time in private, the second time at a glittering social function.

Lady Heathcote's ball provided the occasion for the climax to their troubled relationship. Caroline had gone with the intention of making one final bid for Byron's affection and loyalty. Her gaiety and her choice of gallant waltzing partners were meant to arouse his jealousy, but he saw through the

manœuvre and when they exchanged a few words during the course of the evening was politely sarcastic. Caroline—piqued and very much upset—then staged the most dramatic scene of her life. Rushing into the drawing room, she broke a glass and gashed her arms with the jagged splinters! Only the prompt intervention of Lady Melbourne saved her from serious injury or even death.

The incident created a sensation when reported in the London newspapers next day. Dazed and defeated and shamed, for her conduct had put her outside the pale of fashionable society, Caroline crept back to the quiet of the Hertfordshire countryside.

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#### RECONCILIATION

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There was no one to whom she could turn for sympathy except her husband, who had watched with calm indifference her romance running out its predestined course. William's mother and the other members of the family,





**Brocket Park. The elegant Palladian bridge designed and constructed by the architect James Paine some 200 years ago. Photograph by Rudolph Robert.**

who felt they had been disgraced by the happenings at Lady Heathcote's and by the public admission of Caroline's liaison, wanted him to wash his hands of her. This, because of his genuine concern about her welfare, he refused to do, and so things dragged on for another two years. Then at last, worn out by her schizophrenic outbursts and the insistence of all the Lambs, he agreed that there would have to be a separation. Caroline was writing *Glenarvon*, in the mysterious way already described, with the object of telling the world how ill-used she had been. Byron, William, Lady Melbourne, almost everyone she knew was criticized. The only tangible result, however, apart from good business for the booksellers, was to alienate her in-laws and her husband still further.



Plans for the parting, therefore, went ahead. The lawyers received their instructions and drew up the formal deed of separation. When eventually the arrangements were complete, William left London for Bocket, intending to spend a quiet night there. However, clever, resourceful and unpredictable Caroline followed him down, arriving late at night when he was retiring, and made a last desperate plea for sympathy and understanding.

**Caroline Lamb wrote her novel "Glenarvon" at Bocket Hall in mysterious circumstances, working by candlelight when everyone else was asleep. After the break with Byron she made a bonfire of his letters in the grounds of this beautiful park. Photograph by Rudolph Robert.**

When on the following morning the attorneys came with the various papers to be signed a great surprise awaited them, for they found Caroline sitting on their client's knee, feeding him with thin slices of bread and butter! William waved the bundle of papers away and announced blithely that he and his wife were reconciled!

#### BYRON'S FUNERAL CORTEGE

Nine years passed and then, on a day in June 1824, a melancholy thing happened. Caroline and William were out driving, and as they emerged from the gates of Bocket

Park they met a funeral cortege making its way slowly and solemnly along the road. William, on inquiry, learnt what his wife had already intuitively guessed. Byron, who had identified himself with the Greek struggle for independence, was dead and they were taking his body back to Newstead for burial.

Caroline, seeing the sombre procession of coaches pass by, was deeply affected. Old memories flooded back tumultuously and she returned to Bocket in a state of distress. Again her nerves, unable to withstand the slightest shock, went to pieces. In the weeks and months that followed there were stormy scenes, when she screamed abuse at people, galloped about on horseback like a tormented Valkyrie, and raved compulsively for hours on end. To remind herself of Byron she hung his portrait in her bedroom; to forget him she drugged herself with laudanum and drank brandy by the bottleful.

A year later, in 1825, she and her husband agreed to separate. William went to live in London; she stayed on at Bocket Hall, in the solitude of the lovely Hertfordshire park, forcing herself to be content with the company of her ailing son, Augustus, and her ageing father-in-law, Lord Melbourne, and with memories of the poetic genius whose advent into her life had brought first a delirium of happiness and then, when love was dead, disappointment, fury and a lingering sadness.

