



Shelley: The Pursuit

Richard Holmes

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Shelley: The Pursuit is the book with which Richard Holmes—the finest literary biographer of our day—made his name. Dispensing with the long-established Victorian picture of Shelley as a blandly ethereal character, Holmes projects a startling image of "a darker and more earthly, crueler and more capable figure." Expelled from college, disowned by his aristocratic father, driven from England, Shelley led a life marked from its beginning to its early end by a violent rejection of society; he embraced rebellion and disgrace without thought of the cost to himself or to others. Here we have the real Shelley—radical agitator, atheist, apostle of free love, but above all a brilliant and uncompromising poetic innovator, whose life and work have proved an essential inspiration to poets as varied as W.B. Yeats and Allen Ginsberg.

Shelley: The Pursuit Details

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Author : Richard Holmes

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From Reader Review Shelley: The Pursuit for online ebook

John says

I should re-read this biography, now that I am reading Ann Wroe's new biography of Shelly. My recollection of this book is that it contains a very exciting and fast-paced story of Shelly's life, focusing on the events and circumstances of his life. Among the best of Holmes' uniformly wonderful biographies.

lisa_emily says

Finally I finished it.

Jack Bates says

This is an exhaustive account of Shelley's life and it's pretty exhausting as well. Very well researched and fascinating, if only to prove, once again, that while poets are interesting, and important (Shelley for his political views as well as his verse) my God they're so annoying. I have yet to read a biography of a poet that didn't just make me tired at the thought of trying to live with them. Actually to be fair Shelley gets a lot less annoying as he gets older, so it's a shame on a number of levels that he died so young. And he comes out of this a lot better than Byron. Their relationship is rather interesting though, but it's the dynamic of Shelley, Mary Shelley and Claire Claremont, Mary's sister, that's particularly intriguing. Tough deal for Harriet Shelley though. And I admit I felt a bit sorry for Shelley's parents, who must have found the whole thing exasperating and sad. However, it's all this mess and pain that feeds the muse, so one can't complain too much.

Holmes has written about Coleridge as well, I might read that once next.

Ernie says

Holmes, in this first biography showed all the skills that I enjoyed some years ago reading his work on Coleridge. He quotes extensively from the works and relates them brilliantly to the circumstances and the people's lives. I enjoyed Coleridge more, probably because I found more empathy with him while Shelley became more like the 'mad, bad and dangerous to know' Byron. In my more sympathetic times during this long reading, I found Shelley as a victim of his class, his tyrannical father and his times in which his atheism could land him in gaol or hung, drawn and quartered as a traitor. After his notorious death, sailing in a storm in the Gulf of Spezia, Italy, a journalist in England gloated over the news in The Courier: "Shelley, the writer of some infidel poetry has been drowned; now he knows whether there is a God or no."

The intricacies of Shelley's relationships with the brilliant women who loved him, the Wollstonecraft-Godwin half sisters Claire and Mary and Harriet, his first wife, are fully explored. The early 19th century revolutionary times spread terror among the English ruling class who were probably equally appalled by free love and Shelley's menage a quatre as they feared the threat of political freedom. Publishers were imprisoned for printing Tom Paine so Shelly's political pamphlets and poems were understandably difficult even for a

sympathetic publisher and so many only appeared decades after his death.

They, with the exception of Harriet, were so young, Mary eloped at 16 with Shelly aged 19. He died at 30 and even Byron was only 34 when he died in Greece. They had that romantic fervour that Wordsworth celebrated but in their terms, betrayed. Reform was successfully prevented in England and Holmes reveals how violently it was opposed by writing of those less celebrated atrocities that occurred before the Peterloo Massacre of 1819 which so many historians and school curricula have downplayed, whereas here, to me it read as an equivalent to the horrors of Tienanmen Square or Sharpeville in our time. Shelley's response came in a dramatic poem, *The Mask of Anarchy*, hitherto unknown to me which passionately condemns the official murders but also explores the state's use of agent provocateurs and spies, a situation only too well known to me during the Vietnam war period. My reading of his *Ode to the West Wind* was completely changed: a nature poem became a political call for hope written response to circumstance similar to the Arab Spring of our time.

Holmes, by revealing these less popular or well known works, including fragments and unfinished works helped me understand a poet, not so much in pursuit, but driven to defy his class but never escaping it. For example, he retained that atrocious aristocratic disdain for paying his debts to the lesser orders although he retained his servants over many years and generally had good relationships with them. The fascinating minutiae revealed by diligent research appeared frequently: *Ozymandias* was developed from a poorer version that resulted from a bet made by his two friends who each wrote a poem on the newly fashionable subject of Egyptian archaeology. Shelley's intellectual brilliance was shown in his many translations from Greek and Roman classics of philosophy, drama and poetry to Dante, Schiller and Goethe. His early death prevented him from developing completely away from his classic inheritance to become the greatest poet of the century. And politically, just imagine, in his Italian exile, linking up with Mazzini, Garibaldi and the Risorgimento, or in England leading successful Chartists in a revolution of 1848.

Alexander says

Shelley: The Pursuit is a rigorously researched delineation of "Mad Shelley", the fervid Romantic whose tragically curtailed literary corpus conjures clearer than any images of the sublime and intellectually pure, oftentimes resembling a narrative explosion more than typical day-by-day exegesis. Holmes is unflinching: Shelley appears, at once, a wide-eyed scamp, a relentless pursuer of the preternatural, a monomaniac for the Gothic, an aristocratic puritan, a liberal apostle; a cauldron of intensity, shamelessly cruel and neglectful, capable, arrogant, brilliant, and radical; a definite man of multitudes, always on the move, constantly greeting tragedy and threat of emotional devastation. Richard's style--elegant, controlled, omniscient--is perfect for his task; a great example of an optimal blend of conscientious academia and youthful ardor (Holmes himself being 29 when writing *The Pursuit*). It's quite remarkable I received not one impression of gratuitous indulgence in this near-1000 page book and desired to imbibe *every word*.

Anything else and I'd be spoilin' y'all. Just take the hint and read this shit.

Geoff says

I'll be writing something on this the next few days. It's no small task. Easily the best biography I've ever read. Sorry Ellmann and Boyd, Joyce and Nabokov are towering subjects, but this takes the prize.

Bob says

Nearing the end of these 800 pages, I began to think it's a good thing Shelley didn't live past 29. One of the pleasures of this kind of lengthy literary biography is it assumes you know (or are willing to learn, on the fly) a great deal about the history of the time (early 19th century England, in this case), all of the other significant literary, artistic and intellectual figures of the day, masses of detail about the architecture and topography of multiple Italian and Swiss locations (not to mention half a dozen parts of England, Scotland and Wales, since Shelley never stayed in one place for long).

One should also, in theory, enjoy all the close reading and analysis of a huge body of poetry that "one" is not so familiar with - sadly for my poetic sensibilities, I often found myself getting impatient at those parts and wanting to get to the next episode in the poet's unbelievable soap opera of life - perhaps I'll try to return to some of the more literary parts!

Laura says

A marvel.

Richard says

Three of my favorite literary biographies are Richard Holmes's two-volume Coleridge work and the single volume on Samuel Johnson. So I was pleased to find this out-of-print Shelley bio at a used book sale. I found it tough going, however. Mostly out of ignorance, I'm not a fan of Shelley's longer poems. I also found him, at least in this biography, to be an unsympathetic figure who ruined the lives of several women and, despite many financial difficulties, never seemed to consider WORKING. I believe this is Richard Holmes's first major biography. It's full of quotes from Shelley's poetry and tells you what Shelley did Monday through Friday plus Saturday and Sunday. If you want that, it's here. I have to believe Holmes got more skillful at picking and choosing details as his career progressed, however.

Jared Colley says

This has got to be the best biography on any British Romantic figure. Richard Holmes is a master biographer; he makes it an art... Well worth the time spent to conquer such a massive book.

Martin says

What a ridiculous, beautiful, genius asshole he was. Holmes tells the tale well, not playing particular favourites with any of the cast of characters (all of which are, in their own ways, flawed to some extent), and his literary analysis of Shelley's work, while necessarily limited, is clear and interesting. One of the best biographies I've read.

Chris says

If I am being honest, I will admit that at times I found this book to be a little dry. But if there was ever a class of presenting a difficult subject warts and all, and yet transmitting the love that the writer has for the subject - this book is it.

Holmes' book was the book that re-launched Shelley or whatever you want to say instead of that.

Honestly, I think Holmes deserves a prize for untangling the whole Mary/Shelley/Claire mess and being fair to all the parties.

You like the Romantics, read this.

Bookdragon Sean says

As far as I'm concerned, this is *the* only decent biography of Shelley. Richard Holmes writes with stunning detail and clarity. The amount of research that has gone into this vast book is incredible. I learnt so much about him here.

All reading comes from a personal angle, and, for me, Holmes underplays one drastic element of Shelley's life: his diet. Shelley's vegetarianism truly influenced much of his beliefs, his politics, his protests and his poetry. It is such a large part of who he was. Whilst Holmes isn't openly critical towards it, he underplays its role in his psyche and considers it slightly kooky. And that's the only reason I'm not giving this book five stars! Holmes ignored it almost (shakes fist in anger).

Vegetariansim was so much of who Shelley was.

p.s- Sorry about all the Shelley reviews lately! I'm writing on him for my dissertation, and reviewing these books here is the only way I can stay active!

Matt says

A detailed, fascinating portrait of Shelley. It certainly doesn't do Shelley any big favors, but it gives an interesting context for his works.

J.W. Dionysius Nicolello says

Rich,

I know that you're reading this. You have spent your life wondering why nobody except the NYRB has acknowledged your first study, Shelley: The Pursuit. Perhaps you've outdone Ellmann, and you've found the decadeslong hardway: Western society worships Joyce. He was homeless, drunk, blind, purseistant, insane: No one else could get away with spending seventeen years on a book like that. That madness is what we set at the English 203 Altar: There is no room for you, for your precious Shelley. Good thing you moved on to other topics. Knowing full-well in advance Shelley died # Sea # 29, I own your book and will read Shelley's life year by year for the next couple of years. I am too busy to read another 1000-page book - BUT, yours is not ANOTHER 1000-page book. Yours, Dick, is a masterpiece. Probably the only reason this is not common knowledge is because the powers that be are jealous of you. I'm not jealous of you; I am fond of you. This book is fucking astonishing. But I leave it at that - let me weed my way back into reality, like Melmoth the Wanderer.

Your friend,

Joseph

Pretty much right before and the days after Christmas have been total chaos and the hours I intended to spend cramming in as much reading as possible over the break before full-time work, full-time school, full-time, full-time putting together a website and a proper set-up for my Author page here and the six books to go along with it, at last completed in the near face of insanity and/or death, and part-time, wearily, copyrighting and drinking rum with agents.

Today I got to chip away at the first chapter of this one and damn, it is incredible thus far. I pretty much dropped out of the 800+ page literary bio after Joyce less out of exhaustion than figuring there was no where else to go, and to move on with my own traveling, study, and work.

I will remember the last day of 2013 more fondly than the year itself: Drinking a beer, listening to insane jackhammers outside of my window yet being so caught in this Tome it's a non-issue. Now the Dostoyevskian snow is coming down harder - 'Apropos of Falling Snow.'

2014 is interesting in that I have no immediate travel/relocation plans. All of my plans are routed in the aforementioned

There are not too many reviews on this NYRB gem - In time I'll get down to a little something.

See you all tomorrow, the forevertomorrow. On the occasion anyone reading this has such a fun night they end up projectile-vomiting off of a rooftop, maybe it land on a robber's head, or the policeman chasing him.

2014: The Time of the Assassins.
