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An early nineteenth-century cut-and-paste job. In 1825, after Byron’s death, Pierre Louis Bouvier hijacked Thomas Phillips’s 1813 portrait of Byron and superimposed on it an image of the plumed cavalry helmet the poet had designed himself, perpetuating the image of the archetypal Romantic who died on the battlefield in the cause of freedom (see Myth 19).
Source: Paul F. Betz Collection.
30 GREAT MYTHS ABOUT THE ROMANTICS

Duncan Wu

WILEY Blackwell
This book is dedicated to Catherine Payling and her companion, Poppy, the smooth fox terrier (1999–2013)
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I pay tribute to those whose writings I consulted during work on this book, from those who played their part in the editing of scholarly texts to the many who have written short notes correcting errors of fact in such indispensable publications as Notes and Queries. I pay tribute also to those whose arguments and debates played their part in shaping my thoughts. I have not agreed with everyone – that would be impossible – but have striven to summarize them accurately and with respect for their views.

The reports of the seven anonymous readers who analyzed my initial proposal have been constantly to hand; I thank them for their comments. I have not hesitated to turn to friends and colleagues for points of information or opinions on parts of this book, usually in return for nothing other than a sincere thank you, or the cut and thrust of continuing debate: G. E. Bentley, Jr., John Gardner, Sarah Wootton, Glenn Skaggs, Richard Gravil, Peter Cochran, Mary O’Connell, Jane Stabler, Paul Miner, Robert Morrison, Cian Duffy, Seamus Perry, John B. Pierce, Shelley King, Michael O’Neill, Susan J. Wolfson, and Nicholas Roe. Harry Mattison deserves particular thanks for surveying this book from a reader’s perspective, and providing a list of adjustments. Charles E. Robinson has been a friend to this volume from its inception; he read several drafts and offered numerous corrigenda. I am grateful to the three anonymous readers who examined the final typescript and proposed emendations of tone and emphasis. Ben Thatcher, Project Editor at Wiley, has been helpful on production matters, Janet Moth has been a scrupulous and eagle-eyed copy-editor, while Deirdre Ilkson and Emma Bennett have been wise and responsive editors; I am grateful for their guidance, and that of my agent, Charlie Viney.

Giuseppe Albano, Curator of the Keats-Shelley Memorial House in Rome, and his colleague Luca Caddia, gave me access to Trelawny’s
earliest manuscript account of Shelley’s seaside cremation, and provided the coveted photograph of his jawbone, published here for the first time (by kind permission of David Leigh Hunt on behalf of the Leigh Hunt family). As a member of the English Department at Georgetown I have been fortunate in having among my colleagues Paul F. Betz and Carolyn Forché, both of whom have advised me at various points along the way. Professor Betz provided some illustrations for these myths from his personal collection. The Master and Fellows of Campion Hall gave this book a home in Oxford in the summer of 2013, while Chester L. Gillis and Robert M. Groves, the Dean and Provost of Georgetown University, granted me time in which to finish it in the spring and summer of 2014.

This book has sent me back to basics in a way that leads me to reflect on the privilege of having enjoyed, at various times during my early career, the supervision of Jonathan Wordsworth and D. F. McKenzie – both of whom, directly and indirectly, shaped my approach to these essays. In turn I have learned, and continue to learn, from my students at Georgetown University, without whose insights this book would be the poorer. All errors, flights of fancy, and missed tricks are attributable exclusively to me.

My greatest debt is to Catherine Payling, who has assisted my work in countless respects. The dedication of this book to her and her companion Poppy the smooth fox terrier, for many years occupants of Keats House in Rome, is a small acknowledgement of all their endeavours on my behalf.

Duncan Wu
Georgetown University
July 2014
This book aims to reassert the humanity of Romantic writers. That is to say, its objective is to replace misconception and speculation with truth – or, where it is unknown, the admonition to be ‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason’.¹ For some reason, the lethal combination of being both dead and ‘Romantic’ has abstracted writers of the late Georgian period to the point at which they have been divorced from the reality of their own lives and translated into the mini-mart of fantasy: Blake the presumptive inmate of Bedlam in a cell adjacent to that occupied by the artist John Martin, Wordsworth the ravisher of his own sister, Byron the poet slaughtered on the battlefield, Shelley keeping his sails raised in bad weather so as to precipitate his own demise, and Keats born, Christ-like, in a stable. They were (we are told) hostile to the Enlightenment, the Augustans, and the world of science while being atheists, drug users, wife-swappers and rock stars. It is as if the truth were judged harmful to the literature and displaced by a dog’s breakfast of conjecture and surmise.

Even the label by which they are invoked inflicts upon them a species of violence: Romanticism is a flashy but brazenly opaque term.² None of the writers in this book would have used it to describe either themselves or the times in which they lived. From the vantage-point of an adult alive in 1805, when Wordsworth completed The Thirteen-Book Prelude, there

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¹ Great Myths About the Romantics, First Edition. Duncan Wu.
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