

Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822)

Shelley was born on August 4, 1792 and grew up in the of Broadbridge Heath, a Sussex village where he enjoyed outdoor life and sports with his cousin Thomas Medwin. His father Timothy was a member of Parliament and the son of Lord Bysshe so that Percy, as his eldest son, stood to inherit the title and estate. At the age of 10 he was sent to the Syon House Academy, 50 miles away and two years later he enrolled at Eton, where he was severely bullied by classmates. Within a year's time, however, he had published two novels and two volumes of poetry including *St Irvyne* and *Posthumous Fragments of Margaret Nicholson*. In the fall of 1810 he entered University College, Oxford and was sent down only a few months later after the publication of a pamphlet entitled *The Necessity of Atheism* which he co-authored with Thomas Jefferson Hogg (who later wrote a biography of his friend).

Shelley's exasperated parents demanded he forsake his beliefs—including vegetarianism, political radicalism and sexual freedom—but in August of 1811 he eloped with Harriet Westbrook, a 16-year-old woman whom parents had explicitly forbidden him to meet. Soon after the elopement, Shelley became enamoured with a certain Elizabeth Hitchener, a schoolteacher, who inspired *Queen Mab*, his first major poem in which the title-character—derived from Shakespeare—describes a utopian society. In the same period he began to write political pamphlets which he distributed by way of hot air balloons, glass bottles and paper boats. In 1812 he met his hero, the radical political philosopher William Godwin, author of *Political Justice*. In 1815, Shelley wrote *Alastor, or The Spirit of Solitude*, a 720-line poem, now recognized as his first great work. That same year, Shelley's grandfather passed away and left him an annual allowance of £1,000.

Although Shelley's relationship with Harriet remained troubled, the young couple had two children together. Their daughter, Elizabeth Ianthe, was born in June of 1813, when Shelley was 21. Before their second child was born, Shelley abandoned his wife and took up with Mary Godwin, the daughter of his mentor and Mary Wollstonecraft, the famous feminist author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. Godwin's disapproval of the match was such that he ceased to speak with Mary for three years. Meanwhile Shelley and she fled to Paris, taking her sister Jane along with them. Often traveling by foot, they toured France, Switzerland, Germany and Holland, reading aloud to each other from Shakespeare and Rousseau. When the three finally returned home, Mary was pregnant—as was Shelley's wife, Harriet. The news of Mary's pregnancy brought Harriet to her wit's end. She requested a divorce and sued Shelley for alimony and full custody of their children. Harriet's second child with Shelley, Charles, was born in November of 1814. Three months later, Mary gave birth to a girl. The infant died just a few weeks later. In 1816, Mary gave birth to their son, William. In 1816, Mary's step-sister, Claire Clairmont, invited Shelley and Mary to join her on a trip to Switzerland. Claire had become the lover of Lord Byron whose interest in her had begun to wane before the visit took place. Nevertheless, the three stayed in Switzerland all summer. Shelley rented a house on Lake Geneva very near to Lord Byron's and the two men became fast friends. Shelley wrote incessantly during his visit and the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" was composed after a day-long boating trip with the other poet. Shelley travelled through the French Alps with Byron and wrote "Mont Blanc" in response, a philosophical poem pondering the relationship of Man and Nature—a theme familiar from the works of William Wordsworth.

Shelley and Mary returned to England in 1816 to find that Mary's half-sister, Fanny Imlay, had committed suicide while, in December of that year, Harriet took the same course of action, drowning in the Serpentine River in Hyde Park, London. Shelley and Mary married a few weeks later and were accepted back into the family by Mary's father, William Godwin. The English courts were not so pleased, however, and Shelley was denied the custody of his children with Harriet, granting it to foster parents instead. The Shelleys now moved to Marlow, a small village in Buckinghamshire. There, Shelley befriended John Keats and Leigh Hunt, both talented poets and writers. In 1817, he wrote "Laon and Cythna; or, The Revolution of the Golden City" but could find no publisher for a tale that turned on incest. Asked to alter it and find a new title, it appeared as *The Revolt of Islam* in 1818. In spite of the title, the poem focuses on politics and religion, treated in a proto-socialist fashion.

Soon after its publication, the Shelleys left for Italy in company with Claire who planned to visit Byron, then living in Venice, bringing their daughter, Allegra to him. For some years thereafter the Shelleys moved from city to city. Their first-born William was born in Rome and died there of fever. A year later, a daughter, Clara Everina, also died in infancy. Shelley wrote his masterpiece *Prometheus Unbound* about this time. It was while living in Livorno, in 1819, that he wrote *The Cenci*, "The Masque of Anarchy" and "Men of England"—the last a response to the Peterloo Massacre in England. On July 8, 1822, a little short of 30, Shelley drowned while sailing his schooner back from Livorno to Lerici, having met with Leigh Hunt there to discuss their newly printed journal, *The Liberal*. Mary Shelley did not attend his funeral when his body was washed up soon after, but later permitted a marble of it to be raised as a memorial in Oxford. Shelley's ashes were interred in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. More than a century later, he was memorialized in Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey.