



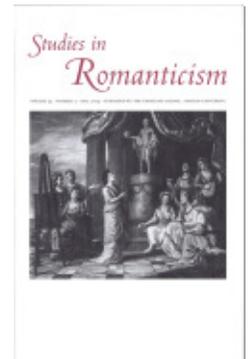
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*Conflicted Life: William Jerdan , 1782–18617. London  
Editor, Author and Critic* by Susan Matoff (review)

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Susan Matoff. *Conflicted Life: William Jerdan, 1782–1869. London Editor, Author and Critic*. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2011. Pp. 659. £65.

William Jerdan is largely forgotten today. If he is known, it is mainly as the lover of Letitia Landon with whom he had three children, as Cynthia Lawford demonstrated some years ago. But in her prodigiously detailed and impressively well-researched study, Susan Matoff argues convincingly that, especially as the long-serving editor of the *Literary Gazette*, “he was a vital facilitator and promoter of aspirants to literature and many other cultural endeavours.” Matoff observes in her useful “Epilogue” that Jerdan’s multifarious writings are “used in studies on art, crime, antiquarianism, photography, electricity, gas lighting and animals.” As a literary figure, he seems at times like a much less talented version of Leigh Hunt, with whom he shared financial incompetence, extraordinary industry, a belief in the diffusion of ideas, and a wish to promote the work of others. Hunt and Jerdan had a falling-out, in fact, after the *Literary Gazette* trashed Charles Lamb’s *Album Verses* in a slashing review that Matoff agrees may have been written by Landon. Hunt’s *Tatler* amused itself with rhyming abuse, arguing that a previous lampoon “conferred an / Honour unmerited on JERDAN, / Saying his intellect was small; / ’Twas thought that he had none at all.”

Jerdan the dunce enjoyed a brief vogue, but he played other roles in his long and busy life. He had a way of being present at occasion and event. He detained the assassin of the Prime Minister Spencer Perceval in 1812, “a feat not too heroic,” as Matoff comments with the judicious dryness that is a welcome feature of the book, “as by this time Bellingham was sitting quietly on a bench, offering no resistance.” He befriended many writers, including Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Charles Dickens, reprinting (without permission) the latter’s story of Sam Weller from the first installment of *The Pickwick Papers*, but helping the young novelist by advising him “to develop Sam Weller’s character ‘largely—to the utmost.’” Later he would bring the work of Hans Christian Andersen to the attention of his readers, and he effected a meeting between Andersen and Dickens. He helped found the Royal Society of Literature, throwing himself with gusto into a scheme intended to help indigent writers. More generally, a product of Scottish Enlightenment culture (he grew up and was schooled in Kelso), welcomed into George Canning’s circle, networking, dining, and toasting, Jerdan dealt with and hovered round the great, the bad, and the good of literary London for many decades.

His career involved Micawber-like risings and fallings, minor triumphs and considerable adversities, huge amounts of work, quarrels with rival periodical editors and owners, financial disaster, and the running of three separate families. Apart from his three children with Landon, he had six chil-

dren who survived infancy with his wife Frances Jerdan, and “a large family” with another woman, Mary Maxwell, with whom he began an affair in the 1830s.

Matoff allows facts to accumulate towards characterization rather than writes with much overt display of inward feeling for her subject. This procedure leads to uniformity of tone and cautiousness, in places, but it also means that her readers are in possession of the evidence they need to arrive at judgments. Hers is not a book that dazzles with novelist-like perceptions, but it possesses the historian’s less flamboyant virtues of care for detail and patient accuracy. Tall, angular and convivial, Jerdan comes across as diffusely energetic to the point of near self-cancellation, likeable, slightly banal, warm-hearted, capable of impressiveness. In the first volume of his *Autobiography* (1852) he writes, as Matoff notes, about “the difficulty of writing about the ‘Self,’” and if this makes him sound, for a faintly absurd moment, like a proto-deconstructive post-Romantic, the truth seems to be more that Jerdan’s inner core was his outer shell, or, to put it more generously, with Madame Merle in mind, from Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady*, “the whole envelope of [his] circumstances.” His alternations of fortune inspire him to speak in an idiom that is at once briskly affecting and invincibly shoddy, having “drained the Circe-cup to the lees,” still aware of “the enchanting draught of its exquisite and transporting sweetness, in spite of the emptiness of its froth and the bitterness of its dregs.”

Jerdan’s relationship with Landon brings into focus these extremes and the posturing they court. His account of meeting Landon in his late thirties is self-betraying about a latent erotic attraction, yet vivid. Landon, then in her teens, caught Jerdan’s eye as possessing “an exuberance of form,” who “strangely combined the infantile with the intellectual,” “trundling her hoop” while reading a book. This was written thirty years after they met, and it illustrates Jerdan’s role in stage-managing the public and posthumous image of L.E.L. Jerdan enthusiastically promoted the career of the young writer who was first his protégée, then his mistress in the pages of the *Literary Gazette*, and yet Landon was no mere exploited product to be sold. One of the strengths of Matoff’s chronological approach (which can result in longeurs) is that it shows how Landon derives creative energy from playing a part about playing a part. The artfully packaged poet began to speak of her inability to speak in poems such as “Lines Written Under a Picture of a Girl Burning a Love Letter.” As Matoff notes, such an action is “something Landon must have routinely done with Jerdan’s personal notes.” The necessarily secretive life she lived is played out in the coded confessions of her poetry, with an obsessive motif of masking, as in “Life’s Mask,” a short piece which concludes: “Outside there is the quaint and gibing mask; / Beneath, the pale and careworn countenance.” For his part, Jerdan, subject

to the gibes of others about his relationship with Landon, appears to have kept silent about its true nature, except on one drunken occasion with Bulwer Lytton.

Matoff makes one aware of the complexities of Landon's life as she juggled public and private demands, and sheds light on her difficult, close relationship with Jerdan, and with society more generally. Landon ceases to be the constructed Sapphic singer, that illusory self she knowingly projects in her poetry, as we read her letter to Jerdan from Paris, complaining of sunstroke and "hoping that you are missing me very much." *Conflicted Life* has many virtues, but none greater than its significant contribution to understanding the biographical contexts of Landon's poetry, which has enjoyed a renaissance of interest in recent years. One of Landon's major subjects is the gap between emotion expressed in poetry and the real-life feelings from which it may derive. In her elegy for Felicia Hemans, she writes: "We say, the song is sorrowful, but know not / What may have left that sorrow on the song." The effect is close to a carefully cultivated mixture of simplicity and dissimulation. The singing line seems unruffled and calm; the words convey a darkly penetrating insight (about readers' inability to penetrate the darkness coiled inside that inscrutable "What"). Again, Landon's "Life of Life" hints at bitter self-accusations ("I borrow others' likeness, till / Almost I lose my own"), and Matoff writes appreciatively that it "sounds like a cry from the heart." Yet it exists in its crystal cabinet of art, too, casting a cold eye on its complications.

Landon's fate supplied Jerdan's life with its central tragedy; the pain he suffered following her premature and mysterious death in 1838, after leaving her children, marrying the Governor of the Gold Coast, and sailing off to live there, is evident in his letter to Lady Blessington in which he comments: "Men are exposed to unhappiness, but alas what else is there for their beautiful and gentle companions?" His own life continued with predictably unpredictable ups and downs. He offers as good an image as any for his existence in his *Autobiography*, where he remarks that "Biography, especially if as various as mine, cannot be constructed with the consistency of an invented plot" and supplies the metaphor of a web "spun by the Moenian Arachne, where there is indeed a centre, but from which the threads diverge in every fashion."

Matoff quotes the passage and remarks that it describes "not only the structure of his *Autobiography*, but also of his literary and personal life"; it would have been interesting had she offered further reflections on the way in which biographical writing differs from the creation of "an invented plot" since the difference points to the peculiar challenge which Jerdan poses, with his miscellaneous activities. In 1853, for instance, he wrote an introductory but clearly informed essay to a collection of George Herbert's

works, commenting with an editor's eye on the typographical illumination of meaning in the poetry's layout; he also worked on a paper for the British Archaeological Association on "Documents relative to the Spanish Armada and the defence of the Thames," as well as composing an introduction for an American book, *Yankee Humour*. Like some hapless but not unheroic figure who might appear in Yeats's analysis of personality-types in *A Vision*, Jerdan seeks fulfillment through the repeated adrenalin shots of commissioned work, through the suggestions of purpose offered by the next review, the next essay, the next bout of puffing or quarreling, the next literary enthusiasm. A contemporary offered this jaundiced praise after his death: "Many liked, without respecting him." It is among the achievements of Susan Matoff's *Conflicted Life* that, in linking Jerdan's life to his times, she manages to make her reader develop a liking for him, including "his struggle against his own indulgent personality," that is also a form of respect.

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