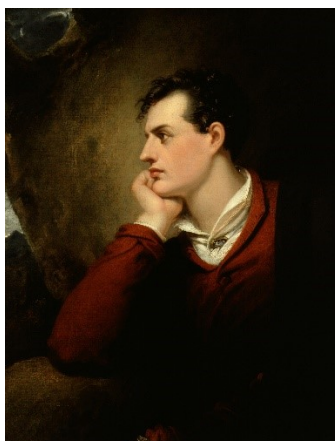


Scandal, Celebrity and Insanity

Like many middle-class Victorians, Samuel Timmins (Honorary Secretary of the Shakespeare Memorial Library Subscribers' Committee) was a great hobbyist. His greatest pastime was Shakespeariana, the enjoyment of anything related to the life, works, and legacy of "England's greatest poet", but he also acknowledged himself to be an avid newspaper reader taking eight daily papers and 'a dozen or more' at the weekends. Like many Victorians he used these papers for cuttings to compile scrap books. In 1874 he declared to his regular correspondent, Joseph Parker Norris in Philadelphia, that he had 20 scrapbooks on the go at any one time.

Three of the non-Shakespearean topics that Timmins was interested in during the 1870s and 1880s were the Stowe:Byron controversy, the Livingstone:Stanley exploits and the royal family. Celebrity (divorce) and mud-slinging in the press between a feminist and women's rights campaigner, and the pin-up boy of the early nineteenth century; stories of exotic exploration designed to sell newspapers; and speculation of the goings on in the royal household. Sounds familiar?

On May 28, 1874 Timmins wrote to Norris: 'I am mad on Byron. I know Childe Harold & a large part of Don Juan by heart. I have collected every available scrap about Byron & Mrs Stowe.' In 1869 Harriet Beecher Stowe's 'The True Story of Lady Byron's Life', was published simultaneously in America and in England, and immediately generated enormous public interest. Beecher Stowe, the acclaimed writer of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had publicly accused Lord Byron, peer of the realm and romantic poet, of incest. Then as now, celebrity scandal sold newspapers, 'victims' or their proxies could seek popular justice outside a court of law, and careers could be revived or destroyed. According to Hawley, by the 1870s Beecher Stowe's fame was beginning to dim, the rights of women were beginning to be considered and Byron's reputation was undergoing a reappraisal. By June 25, 1874 Timmins wrote: 'Pray don't bother about the Stowe Byron business. I have a huge folio of clippings nearly 3 inches thick now! So I am quite content!' Timmins does not reveal his motivation for his interest in the controversy – whose side was he on? That of the feminist, anti-slavery campaigner whose career needed a boost or the anti-establishment, freedom fighting wild-boy who Timmins considered: 'the greatest poet of our time.'



George Gordon Byron, 6th Baron Byron (Richard Westall)
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‘Some recollections may vary’ (Queen Elizabeth II, March 9, 2021) . . . Did Henry Morton Stanley, in fact, say: ‘Dr. Livingstone, I presume?’ when he found the missionary and explorer in Ujiji, near Lake Tanganyika? Stanley, a former workhouse boy, soldier and journalist had been sponsored by Gordon Bennett, the publisher of the New York Herald to find Livingstone and on doing so, he immediately became a controversial figure in the United States and Great Britain. The pages of his journal covering the initial meeting were mysteriously torn out and Stanley was accused of exaggeration and lying to further his own career. His debated activities in Africa have gained him support and antipathy ever since. Samuel Timmins recorded attending Livingstone’s funeral in Westminster Abbey on April 17, 1874 and on February 9, 1881, Timmins reported to Norris that he had seen Stanley at the Royal Geographical Society in London on the previous evening and had, in fact, lighted his cigar. Unlike in the Stowe:Byron controversy, Timmins professed his opinion by writing: ‘He had a fine reception & he deserved it.’ Stanley was a man of his time, as were Livingstone and Timmins, (and, indeed, Lord Byron and Beecher Stowe, a woman of her time) and may not pass the test of political correctness in the twenty-first century.



Stanley meets Livingstone / H.H. Tanzania Ujiji, 1872. [Photograph]
Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2008678860/>

Timmins was a self-confessed ‘out and out’ Republican who greatly admired Joseph Priestley, a supporter of both the American and French revolutions. Timmins registered a dislike of Prince Leopold, Duke of Albany on several occasions. ‘I am disgusted to find that a scrofulous princeling (Leopold) is going to be married & that we shall have to pay & Holy Church will have to celebrate a union which ought never to take place & which will probably result in a diseased progeny of royal blood!’ Leopold, Queen Victoria’s youngest son, had in fact inherited haemophilia from his mother and did pass it on to his daughter. Recent medical research indicates that Queen Victoria was a carrier of both haemophilia and porphyria. Porphyria is most commonly associated with George III and his ‘madness’. Victoria had already been on the throne of England for nearly four decades when Timmins wrote in 1880: ‘I have long believed that the Queen herself has been mad for years’. Victoria was, and still is, thought to have been in a relationship with John Brown. ‘My own private opinion is that like some of the rest of the family she is insane & has been for some years & that John Brown is

only her “Keeper”!’ (March 1880). Timmins use of the word ‘keeper’ could denote either that he considered the Queen a kept woman or, as with Bertha Mason and Grace Poole in *Jane Eyre*, that John Brown was a mad person’s attendant.



Queen Victoria & John Brown 1868
© National Portrait Gallery, London

Shakespeare wrote: ‘Reputation is an idle and most false imposition; oft got without merit, and lost without deserving.’ (Othello, Act 2, scene iii). On 27 March 1870 Reynolds’s Newspaper decried the era as ‘a period when the public journals are teeming with scandals involving the names of royal personages ... a period when scarcely a day has passed over our heads that some fresh instance of adultery on the parts of the ruling classes is not brought to light.’ Over the last one hundred and fifty years, little seems to have changed in the interests of newspapers and their readers.

Siân Scholes

‘Everything to Everybody’ Heritage Ambassador



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