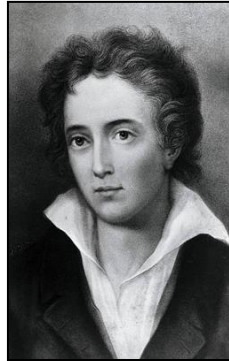


## A Buckinghamshire Poet Percy Bysshe Shelley



Perhaps it is a little generous with the truth to include Shelley among the poets of Bucks, for he was neither born nor educated in the county, and spent much of his life travelling beyond the county's boundaries in England and Europe, to finally die in Italy. It was here in Bucks, however, that he wrote that most enigmatic and visionary poem, *The Revolt of Islam*, while residing with his wife Mary, herself famously the author of the gothic novel *.Frankenstein*. She writes of the contrast between the wealth and beauty of the landscape around the town, and the misery and poverty of the labouring population:

During the year 1817 we were established at Marlow in Buckinghamshire. Shelley's choice of abode was fixed chiefly by this town being at no great distance from London, and its neighbourhood to the Thames. The poem was written in his boat, as it floated under the beech groves of Bisham, or during wanderings in the neighbouring country, which is distinguished for peculiar beauty. The chalk hills break into cliffs that overhang the Thames, or form valleys clothed with beech; the wilder portion of the country is rendered beautiful by exuberant vegetation; and the cultivated part is peculiarly fertile. With all this wealth of Nature which, either in the form of gentlemen's parks or soil dedicated to agriculture, flourishes around, Marlow was inhabited (I hope it is altered now) by a very poor population. The women are lacemakers, and lose their health by sedentary labour, for which they were very ill paid. The Poor-laws ground to the dust not only the paupers, but those who had risen just above that state, and were obliged to pay poor-rates. The changes produced by peace following a long war, and a bad harvest, brought with them the most heart-rending evils to the poor. Shelley afforded what alleviation he could. In the winter, while bringing out his poem, he had a severe attack of ophthalmia, caught while visiting the poor cottages. I mention these things,--for this minute and active sympathy with his fellow-creatures gives a thousandfold interest to his speculations, and stamps with reality his pleadings for the human race.

Shelley was witnessing this poverty and social injustice at Marlow two years before the Peterloo massacre, when hunger unemployment ravaged Britain, and the Westminster government was

ruthlessly crushing any movement that might promise a popular uprising. In France, the freedoms won by the Revolution had been destroyed first by Bonaparte, and then by the restored of the Bourbons monarchy. Despairing that there could be liberation for humanity in a Europe where the ruthless authoritarian pre revolutionary regimes were everywhere firmly re-established, Shelley looked across the Atlantic towards the young republic that had cast off the chains of tyranny. In *The Revolt of Islam*, he writes:

*There is a People mighty in its youth,  
A land beyond the Oceans of the West,  
Where, though with rudest rites, Freedom and Truth  
Are worshipped; from a glorious Mother's breast,  
Who, since high Athens fell, among the rest  
Sate like the Queen of Nations, but in woe,  
By inbred monsters outraged and oppressed,  
Turns to her chainless child for succour now,  
It draws the milk of Power in Wisdom's fullest flow.*

*That land is like an Eagle, whose young gaze  
Feeds on the noontide beam, whose golden plume  
Floats moveless on the storm, and in the blaze  
Of sunrise gleams when Earth is wrapped in gloom;  
An epitaph of glory for the tomb  
Of murdered Europe may thy fame be made,  
Great People! as the sands shalt thou become;  
Thy growth is swift as morn, when night must fade;  
The multitudinous Earth shall sleep beneath thy shade.*

We might wonder, were Shelley's ghost to be awakened into the dream of life, what might be his feelings on the progress and destiny through the ages of the American nation of which he had such hopes.

**Michael Ghirelli**