

**Lavengro and Romany Rye** by George Borrow  
Reviewed by Richard W. Amero

There are a few things readers should know about **Lavengro** and **Romany Rye** by George Borrow that they won't obtain by reading these halves of one book. First it was written during the early reign of Queen Victoria when Borrow was 48 years old and comfortably settled as the husband of a wealthy widow and owner of an extensive estate at Oulton. The semi-autobiographical stories in **Lavengro** and **Romany Rye** take place during the reign of George IV, who died without legitimate issue. **Lavengro** and **Romany Rye** are both nicknames for George Borrow that were given him by his gypsy friends Jasper Petulengro and the crude members of his family that roamed the country sides of Ireland, Wales, England and Scotland. At the age of twenty-two Borrow decided to leave London where he had not succeeded in establishing a permanent livelihood and to set forth on a four-month walking tour of Staffordshire and its environs. As a youth under the suzerainty of his father, a military man, he had become habituated to moving from encampment to encampment. He had discovered during these changes in location that he had a knack for picking up the colloquial and dialect languages that were spoken by natives in the British Isles and by gypsies who appeared from time to time in the villages and fairs of pre-industrial England. Borrow's knowledge of vernacular speech was supplemented by lessons in Latin that he had picked up from tutoring during his father's sporadic movements. Despite his many military assignments, his father did not serve in the then raging Napoleonic wars.

Readers of English Literature might recognize a similarity between Borrow's treatment of his father and Lawrence Sterne's treatment of Sir Toby in **Tristram Shandy**. They are both eccentric figures, only in Borrow's case, his father's claim to fame was his defeat of Big Ben, a famous bruiser of the time. From his father, if not from Sterne, who was not addicted to pugilism, Borrow acquired a love of free-style boxing as a spectator sport and, in his young years, as a participant. Because Borrow was adept with his fists and because he could ride horses without a saddle and because he took to the open road with meager funds, he comes across as a sturdy masculine person. His aggressive masculine identity is contradicted, however, by traits that were not always those of his footloose and cagey gypsy friends or of the bruisers and shysters, horse groomers, and innkeepers with whom he kept spirited company. By nature a solitary person, he was given to melancholy and preferred to be alone. His being beset by a mental malady which he called the "horror" encouraged his asocial tendencies. His temporary spells could be neurological in origin or they could be a product of his psychology or of the food and beverages he consumed. This latter would certainly be the case when his alter ego, **Lavengro**, was poisoned by a cake made by Mrs. Herne, a gypsy crone, who wanted to poison him because he had learned the secretive gypsy language. It is not coincidence that there are three conspicuous mental cases in **Lavengro** and **Romany Rye**: that of a man who is always touching things, that of a man who learns Chinese to keep from depression, and that of a man, who when a child, committed the dreadful sin against the Holy Ghost. **Lavengro's** solution to the last "horror" is to forget about it as God is not going to punish children for an act of naïve foolishness.

Borrow's actual wanderings that take up the greater part of his two books on are picaresque in nature . . . that is the incidents and characters he meets in his rambles follow one another in a manner similar to that in fragmented narratives that were written by authors who had not yet acquired a skill for long and coherent stories. The most prominent of these novels is **Gil Blas de Santillane** by Lesage though novels by Miguel Cervantes, by Henry Fielding and by Mark Twain are of this type. Fortunately for those readers who have become fascinated by Borrow's numerous explorations, his writings are hard to put down because they contain excellences in description and characterizations that strike happy chords in readers. The few commentators this reviewer has read tend to illustrate Borrow's writing skills by quoting from his works. This is not possible in a short summation, but the keenness in Borrow's descriptions of scenes, characters and events owe much to the painstaking and disciplined style initiated by Daniel Defoe, author of **Moll Flanders**, a novel that is much alluded to in **Lavengro**. Like Defoe, Borrow shows how to suggest a scene or to sketch a character with the fewest words possible. Some of the allusions to other languages and to his philological discoveries are not always as adventitious in the two halves of one book. Lavengro's tendency to think of himself as a hero of Celtic, Saxon, Welsh, Danish and Germanic myths seems to be excessive. These adumbrations were possibly produced in emulation of the spirit of Cervantes' "Knight of the Woeful Countenance" where medieval tales of chivalry and gallantry are the essence of Don Quixote's aspirations.

There are many ways in which **Lavengro** and **Romany Rye** can be interpreted. Consequently there is no limit to the number of essays that can be written as admirers of Borrow's wide range can attest. Lavengro, the character, has a curious philosophical interest in religion as he finds it in his travels among illiterate and literate people. He, or author Borrow, appear to have an excellent grounding in incidents in the Bible and may have heard of the doubts of the French essayist Montaigne and the purported atheism of the English philosopher David Hume. At any rate, Lavengro enjoys discussing religion with the gypsies, Jews, Quakers, tractarians evangelists and dissenters he meets. He has a strong antipathy to Roman Catholicism which was endemic to the numerous Protestant sects he encountered in Great Britain and may have been exacerbated by his acquaintance with the wiggly Irish people who were held in subjugation by the Protestant Hanoverian monarchy that his father served. In contradictory but in all too human fashion, Borrow is fond of the English "old-fashioned" or Tudor church as it had been shaped by Divines in the reign of Queen Elizabeth I and he is vehemently opposed to the Catholic Emancipation Laws which were being debated in the English Parliament during the reign of George IV. The more potent Corn Laws are mentioned in passing, but Lavengro, and Borrow, refrain from giving an opinion.

There are some defects in the two-part novel which readers should discover on their own. There is a long discussion of the history of Hungary which is digressive and pedantic. Dialogue between Lavengro and his companions on the road often takes the form of questions and answers which are tedious and sing-song. An appendix at the end of **Romany Rye** is almost as long as both **Lavengro** and **Romany Rye** and could have been left out. It is Borrow's answer to professional critics and to querulous readers. The style is discursive and it detracts from a novel which should be allowed to speak for itself.

This reviewer will not go into the many extraordinary figures Borrow meets in his roaming who captivate him and also his readers, but he will mention Isopel Berners, who has been much

discussed by critics who conjecture who she was and what she meant to Borrow. First, Isopel Berners, though she took to the road to avoid being a ward of the state, was not a gypsy. She was taller than Lavengro, who was himself over six feet in height. She had a mean left hook and was scornful of those she did not like. Unlike the dark-haired and dark-skinned gypsies, Berners was Celtic and blonde. Borrow treated her gruffly and tried to make her learn the Armenian language, a pursuit of no practical value in her uncertain life. After she decided to leave for America Borrow, who was always chaste proper and cold, thought momentarily that he had missed an opportunity for wedded bliss. Isopel Berners occupies only a few chapters where she lived in a tent next to Borrow's in a sequestered and picturesquely described "dingle"; then she is gone. Was she a real person? This reviewer guesses that Borrow befriended a self-confident and independent woman with few resources except her strength of character to depend on and that he embellished her, as he did other people in his extended novel, to make her the haunting phantom she became.

After his four month dalliance as a wanderer and self-conscious portraitist, Borrow became a Bible salesman in Russia and Spain and married a wealthy widow, which was in keeping with the fate of other fictional and non-fictional heroes and heroines in the literature of the time, so perhaps his aloofness to Isopel Berners was a sign that like Tobias Smollett's Roderick Random and Peregrine Pickle and Jane Austen's many impoverished virgins, he put wealth before love. But this later section of Borrow's career is not covered in **Lavengro** and **Romany Rye**, which ends with the enigmatic statement: "I shouldn't wonder if Mr. Petulengro and Tawno Chikno came originally from India. I think I'll go there." Those who read **Lavengro** and **Romany Rye** will be entranced by Borrow. They will not always like him because he was a prig, a cad and a bigot. Despite his capability as a philologist, he was not always bright ... he liked Byron but thought Wordsworth put people to sleep. He preferred ale to sherry and thought the latter was a corrupter of character and morals. Maybe it comes down to a difference in temperament between the Saxon and the Latin. As with the writings of Lesage, Daniel Defoe and Mark Twain young readers will be so entranced by the escapades and meetings with colorful strangers in **Lavengro** and **Romany Rye** that they will never be able to forget them: the younger the reader, the better.