Joseph Blacket would not have passed into posterity were it not for the brilliant albeit cruel “Epitaph” that Byron wrote in memory of the “late poet and shoemaker” of that name. Curiously, both men had romanticised the siege of Zaragoza in Spain soon after the events, the first with “The Fall of Saragossa”, a longish poem, and the second with the ‘Spanish maid’ stanzas of Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage. Byron, an aristocrat, a Whig sympathiser, and a gifted poet; Blacket, a working class man, a Tory sympathiser, and a poetaster: How can such disparate characters be attracted by the same poetical subject? A probable answer is that the Peninsular War, a major episode of British political and military intervention abroad, had become a favourite topic for British writers. This included not only works by those we now call major Romantic poets but also a substantial amount of poetry put together by authors who enjoyed popularity in their time but were later forgotten, to which must be added a host of readers who sent their occasional lines on the war to the papers.

The fact that academic criticism has tended to focus on other facets of Romanticism probably explains why, to this day, the cultural impact of the Peninsular War has yet to be fully integrated into Romantic studies. Very few critical works have contributed significantly to enlighten the field, and collections of primary sources are equally rare. An international research team is trying to redress this balance by means of
a major project which includes finding, collecting, editing, analysing and translating a substantial corpus of Peninsular War poetry written in languages other than Spanish. We expect before long to be able to offer interested researchers a free-access digital library comprising reliable e-editions with bibliographical details of all the items in the corpus, plus a series of bilingual anthologies with introductory studies, the first of which has just been published.

In what way does all this affect Byron and Byron studies? His main contribution to Peninsular War poetry was *Childe Harold* Canto I, which he largely wrote in Albania, Autumn of 1809, after having spent several weeks in the Peninsula, and which was published with some changes in the Spring of 1812 together with Canto II, devoted to Greece. Canto I largely focuses on Spain at war, and in fact the battle of Talavera, one of the bloodiest in the conflict, was waged when Byron was visiting the country, and is reflected in the poem. The Spanish canto of *Childe Harold* very much pivots on this battle, which illustrates the poet’s fascination for soldierly courage and the art of war but, above all, his condemnation of destruction, violence and cruelty. Maybe the bullfighting stanzas of the canto, which lend themselves to various interpretations, can be seen in the same light. In any case, the day the book was published Byron awoke to find himself famous --the poem “on every table” and the poet universally “courted, visited, flattered and praised,” in the Duchess of Devonshire’s words. Byron biographers have provided plenty of details about the reception of the young lord’s new work, which, though largely restricted to the well-to-do, was as phenomenal a success as it was unexpected. But focusing on the social and personal aspects of the response may have been to blame for comparative lack of attention being paid to other equally interesting issues. For instance the fact that when the Spanish canto came out, it was in the context of a reading public who had been flooded with a veritable downpour of
Peninsular War writing for nearly four years, to be prolonged for two more to the end of the war. This paper is aimed at considering *Childe Harold’s* Spanish canto in the light of this context --or, rather, co-text, the set of texts that, as just mentioned, are at the moment being fed into our digital archive.

Poems on the Peninsular War began to appear with the arrival in London, on June 8th, 1808, of a group of Asturian deputies sent to ask for British help by their Junta, which had declared war on Napoleon. It was in this curious way that the British first learned of the Spanish rebellion against the emperor of the French. As is natural, the first poems to reflect these unwonted events expressed a unanimous sense of bewilderment and admiration for the Spanish patriots, reinforced by their unprecedented victory at Bailén. This is reflected in “A funeral song for the Spanish patriots”, “A pindaric effusion to the cause of Spain and Europe”, “An address to the patriots of Spain”, “Ode to Spain”, “A war song”, “Spain and liberty!”, “The Spanish patriot” and Erwin’s *Ode to Iberia*, probably the earliest long poem published on the conflict. None other than Wordsworth wrote as many as fourteen sonnets on the Peninsular War which belong in this ‘patriotic’ line, starting with two in 1808 that focus on “the hopes and fears of suffering Spain.” Soon a second line opened in which Spain and Britain were pictured as allies in the common fight against the French tyrant, often with Britannia seen as the saviour of Iberia: titles include “The crisis, or Britain’s glory”, “Mid the tempest that o’er her horizon is spread”, *Stanzas of an English friend to the patriots of Spain, Spain! Her patriots! And old England!*, “The deliverance of Spain”, *England’s pre-eminence in arms* and *England and Spain* by the then very young Felicia Hemans, the first of the authors now considered classics to write a long poem about the war. It is interesting to notice that political bias is not apparent at this stage: early poems on the Peninsular War as published in *The Morning Chronicle*, an organ of expression of the
Whigs, then in the opposition, share with those printed in *The Times*, independent, or in *The Sun* or *The Morning Post*, Tory and thus pro-government, a feeling of sympathy and admiration for the Spanish patriots.

Many of the poems on the Spanish conflict published in 1809 follow the same track. Among them is Blacket’s, and titles like “Ode on the spirit of Spain”, “The Spanish mother”, “Grand march of the Spanish patriots”, *Iberia’s crisis* and three more sonnets by Wordsworth which, like many of the poems just mentioned, focus on the tragical sieges of Zaragoza. A new line, equally pro-Spanish, opened with poems like Heber’s *Europe: Lines on the present war* and Belfour’s *Spanish heroism; or, the battle of Roncesvalles*: these are ‘sub-texts’ that do not romanticise present but past events, often the Spanish Reconquest against the Islamic invaders, explicitly seen in introductions or notes as a model for the present-day patriots to follow. Satire against the intruder king Joseph, very common in Spanish poems, also reached the English language with epigrams like “Boney’s proclamation: Or brother Joey or I.” British involvement in the conflict had started with a fiasco: Moore’s retreat and re-embarking from Coruña, a disaster which soon provoked a specific line of poetical response: Matthew Lewis’s *Monody on the death of Sir John Moore*, the anonymous *Lines on the lamented death of Sir John Moore*, Porter’s “Lines to the memory of Sir John Moore” and Frome’s *An independent tribute to the memory of lieutenant-general Sir John Moore* were among the early contributions. Major battles involving substantial intervention of the British army, now led by Arthur Wellesley, started to be fought on Spanish soil. Talavera was the first; it soon inspired the occasional poem “Talavera” and, more importantly, Croker’s *The battles of Talavera*, the most popular Peninsular War poem, which went through many editions in a short time and was praised by Wellington himself.
1809 was a difficult year, with much British money spent and much British blood shed on the Peninsula, and it is only normal that the initial unanimous sympathy towards Spain began to feel the strain. There are no poems against the Spanish cause, but the allies start to see each other with mistrust. “To him who despairs of Spain”, a poem also by Croker, is significant: while here the poet is optimistic about the Spaniards’ determination to win the war, it is not less true that his *Battles of Talavera* came as a strong support to the British government intervention policy, which basically consisted in leaving as little initiative as possible to the peninsular allies. It was then that Byron made his first modest sortie into the world of Peninsular War poetry with “The Girl of Cadiz” (written on August 25th, 1809) in which the protagonist is transformed into an Agustina de Aragón figure who, “when thronging foemen menace Spain”, “hurls the spear ... should her lover press the plain.”

1810 was a bitter year for the Spanish patriots, with their British ally stationed far away in Portugal and their territory reduced to little more than Cadiz. A decline in the number of poems follows, though there are several which carry on the ‘patriotic’ line like “Sonnet, to the Spanish patriots”, “The dying patriot”, “To the memory of those who fell in the defence of Saragossa” or “The Spanish patriot”, in which Spain is set as “an example for Europe.” Wordsworth wrote as many as seven new patriotic sonnets during this year, most of them devoted to Zaragoza’s “matchless worth.” Sotheby’s *Constance de Castile* was an addition to the sub-text line, this time focusing on a medieval episode of co-operation between the Castilian king and the Black Prince in their fight against the throne pretender and his French allies --a perfect event to stage the legitimacy of Ferdinand VII backed up by Britain *versus* an intrusive Joseph supported by France. Finally Mitford's “Ode to the memory of Sir John Moore” adds on
to this specific line and is critical of the Spaniards, which caused a relative’s reprimand to its young author.

1811 is the year the Anglo-Portuguese and Spanish alliance reactivated and obtained important victories on Spanish territory. This meant a wealth of fresh ‘patriotic’ poems such as Irwin’s “Sketch of an epitaph on the Marquis of Romana”, Moore’s “Hark! From Spain, indignant Spain”, Fitz-Gerald’s “Battle of Barrosa”, Gwilliam’s Battle of Albuera, the anonymous Catalonia, and Weippert’s “Spanish Serenade.” The most peculiar addition to the line was however Spanish Eclogues by ‘Hispanicus’, which, though innocent-looking, is in fact a belligerent celebration of the guerrilla epics, plus an elegy on Romana. Finally, Walter Scott’s Vision of Don Roderick was, given the prestige of its author, a powerful addition to the ‘patriotic’ and ‘Anglo-Spanish’ lines complete with a praise of Wellington, who the poem presents as a brave “chieftain” in command of gallant hosts from England, Scotland and Ireland who sail into the Peninsula to fight the tyrant. “The isle of the Ocean is tyranny’s foe” belongs in the same line while Wolfe’s “Burial of Sir John Moore after Corunna”, probably written in 1811, is the last and best addition to this line of poems. It was also probably in the same year that another major author, Robert Southey, wrote his first contributions to the war’s poetical set with “Talavera” and “For a monument at Albuhera.”

1812 was the year that Childe Harold, cantos I and II, came out. The Spanish canto was a subversive response to Croker’s Battles of Talavera, agreed with the Whig opposition’s non-interventionist policy and was basically an anti-war poem that denounced the absurdity of all conflicts. In this sense it was revolutionary, an uncomfortable dissonance at odds with the already large corpus of Peninsular War poetry which shared and fostered almost unanimously the establishment position.
Curiously however, Byron was not alone. It was also in 1812 that Anna Barbauld published *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*, another demolishing blow to the establishment in the name of an anti-war feeling shared with *Childe Harold*. While Byron’s attitude was seen as the product of “cowardice” by Ellis, of the *Quarterly Review*, Barbauld’s was seen as the consequence of her being “a lady author” by none other than Croker, writing for the same journal. Byron’s career was, if anything, fostered by these harsh reactions, but for Barbauld it meant the end of hers. It is important to remark that neither *Childe Harold* nor *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven* are anti-Spanish, or pro-French poems, the Spanish patriots being represented in both as freedom fighters against the “Gallic Vulture” and the “Despot’s Sway” respectively. “Lines written on reading ... some remarks on the continuation of the slave trade by Spain and Portugal”, published in *The Morning Chronicle*, is indeed critical of the peninsular authorities over the slave trade, and the fact that there was some opposition to the continuation of the war in Parliament during this period may have fed these few tokens of critical response. But it is not less true that the war was now, for the first time, going Wellington’s way, with decisive victories in Ciudad Rodrigo, Badajoz and Salamanca. This meant in turn that the vast majority of poetic writing continued being supportive of the war effort. Poems like “Liberty; a dream”, Temple’s *Siege of Zaragoza* and Hemans’s “War song of the Spanish patriots” belong in the traditional patriotic line, while Stevenson’s *Spanish patriots, a thousand years ago*, is a subtext which once more takes the Reconquest as a reference. “Epigram” is a new anti-Joseph satire, while Hersee’s *Fall of Badajoz*, Glanville’s *Iberia* and War, Hamilton’s *Salamanca* and the anonymous “On the victory over Marmont” are all poems, of various lengths, which celebrate Wellington’s latest triumphs.
Things carried on much in the same way during 1813, the last year of the war in the Peninsula. Napoleon paid dearly for his Russian campaign, which meant depriving his \textit{Armée de l’Espagne} of men, materiel, and above all, morale. Under Wellington’s command, the allies won decisive battles like Vittoria and the Pyrenees, and finally crossed into France. Again there is literary response: this is the year in which the highest number of long poems on the conflict was published. They include Hersee’s \textit{Battle of Vittoria}, Gwilliam’s \textit{The campaign}, Fitzgerald’s \textit{Spain delivered}, and Pearson’s \textit{Battle of Talavera} and \textit{Battle of Salamanca}, to which must be added shorter pieces like Philippart’s \textit{La Puebla’s Tree} and \textit{Victoria}, to name but a few. Even Mitford, who had criticised the Spaniards, published a patriotic subtext, the narrative poem \textit{Blanch of Castile}, in order as she admits to make up for her old mistake. In contrast, only two poems have been found that add on to the anti-establishment line: Moore’s “From the countess dowager of C”, a satire on the London ladies who used to entertain the Spanish envoys while they were fashionable, and the anonymous “The Apes”, a witty fable which shows disappointment over the outcome of the Anglo-Spanish alliance --its closing words being “Oh! war-waging Britain! protectress of Spain / Thy courage how dauntless! thy glory how vain!”

The Peninsular War had two endings: the official one with the Treaty of Valençay, signed on December 11th, 1813, which meant the end of operations on Spanish soil and the return of Ferdinand VII, and the real one at the end of April 1814, after a series of battles fought and won by the allies on French territory. It is then that Wellington, hailed as a hero, returns to London to be bestowed his patents of nobility by the Prince Regent. Given these facts, it is only natural that during 1814, especially its first half, a number of new poems dealing with the end of the long war saw the light of day. The first was Southey’s \textit{Carmen Triumphale}. Released on New Year’s Day, the
poet laureate’s ode is a rhetorical summary of the Peninsular War, written to the greater glory of Wellington. It was soon followed by a lesser-known piece, Anne Grant’s *Eighteen Hundred and Thirteen*, which is an ultra-conservative response to Barbauld’s *Eighteen Hundred and Eleven*. As made explicit in its title, O’ Meara’s “Wellington’s welcome. Written in commemoration of the arrival of that illustrious commander” further glorifies the hero, while the dissenting line has a sole representative, “The Good Old Times”, whose sardonic text reads:

‘This past--War drops his crimson lance;  
The Bourbons mount the throne,  
And re-assume their Spain and France,  
To rule by Love alone,  
Resolv’d to prove that France and Spain  
Have better’d their condition,  
One bids the slave trade thrive again,  
And one the Inquisition.

I am sure that Byron would have subscribed to these lines. In fact, he would give new vent to his liberal stance on post-war Spanish politics with *The Age of Bronze*, written on the occasion of the Congress of Verona. But that is another story. In this one, we may conclude, British poetry of the Peninsular War had resulted in a home-front paper war of great political and social importance, which on the whole had been won by the same conservative forces that had crucially contributed to winning the real war in the Peninsula. In that paper war Byron, Barbauld and a few others had played the guerrilla role --but lost.