BEAU BRUMMELL

IAN KELLY

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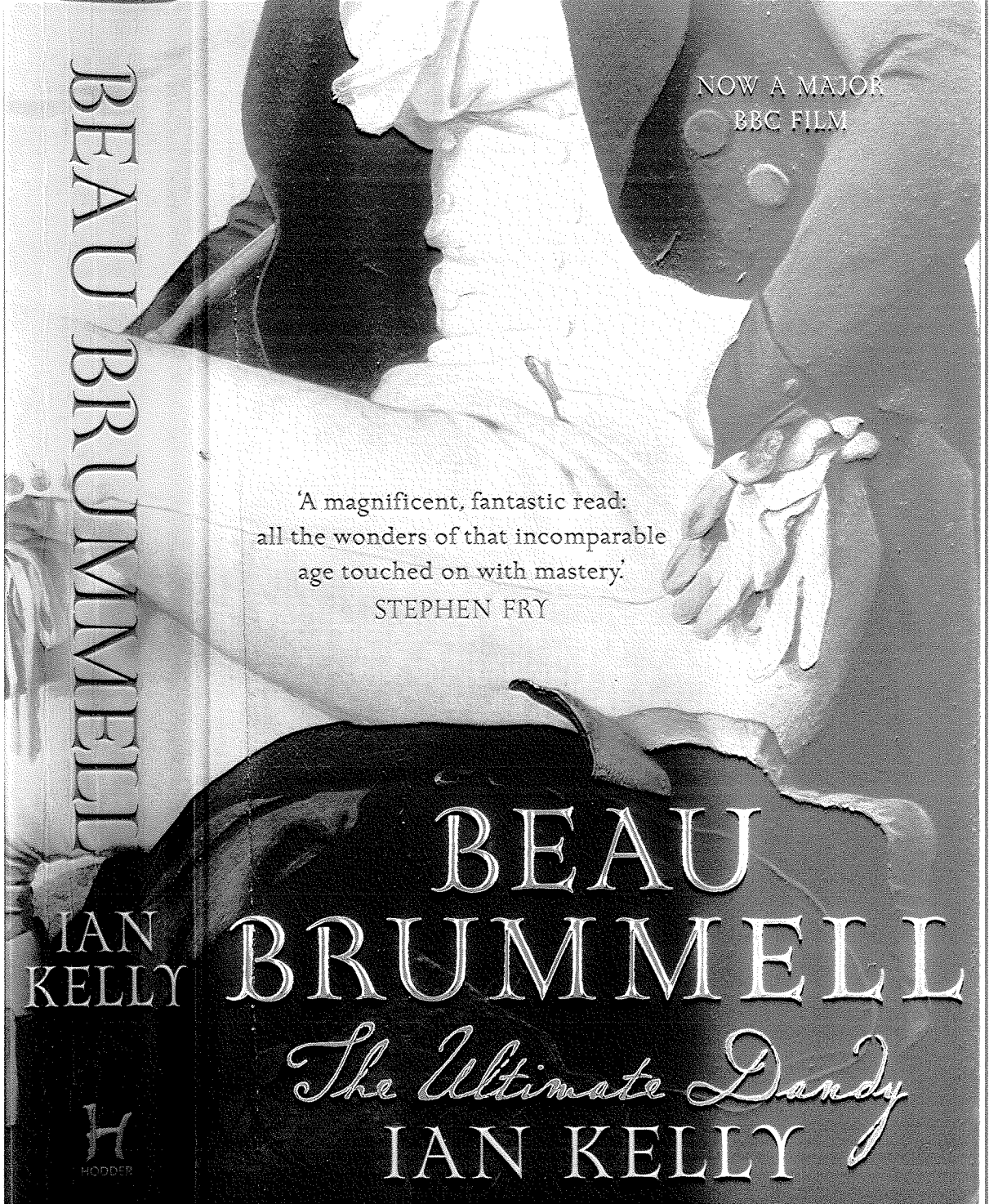

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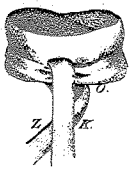
BEAU BRUMMELL

The Ultimate Dandy

IAN KELLY

INTRODUCTION: DANDI, DANDO, DANDUM



If John Bull turns around to look after you, you are not well dressed; but either too stiff, too tight, or too fashionable.

George Bryan (Beau) Brummell

Once it had decided to attach a blue plaque to the house in Mayfair where Beau Brummell once lived, the Greater London Council met a quandary over how to describe him. Londoners deemed worthy of this accolade have usually achieved fame through works or deeds: writers, scientists, soldiers and politicians. Although Brummell's name remained well known, the only accolade attached to it was considered also to be an insult: *dandy*.

In the end, the GLC committee opted for 'Leader of Fashion', though 'Leader of the Fashionable' might have been more precise, or simply 'Celebrity' – a word Brummell used and understood almost in its modern sense. 'Dandy', however, might have served them well. Beau Brummell was a dandy in several of the meanings of this most slippery of words. His contemporaries had also struggled to describe him. At school he was known as 'Buck'. But the soubriquet that stuck for George Bryan Brummell was 'Beau', the name he kept, used, and has been known by ever since.

Though George Brummell was a dandy, he would not have been pleased to be recognised as such in the sense the word is used

today. For Brummell the aphorism that 'less is more' might have been invented. He was a disciplinarian – even an ascetic – in his sense of pared-down style. He never sought to be noticed in a crowd at any distance. He used almost exclusively three colours in his wardrobe: white, buff and blue-black, and wished to be recognised only by the simple perfection of what he wore by those who might note such details up close. His style, once created, he stuck to. This in itself could be said to have been a stance against fashion as currently understood. He was – to the modern mind – an anti-dandy. But the word 'dandy', like Brummell himself, has attracted many meanings over the years, and even within Brummell's own lifetime was a term used as compliment, insult, sexual slur or braggadocio. Dandies, like Brummell, are fascinating because they defy easy definition.

'Dandy', as used today, dates from the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. The term has shifted in meaning from then till now, as words do. But notably the coinage of a word shifts when it has the power to fascinate as well as to insult. 'Dandy' has always had that power. The word first appeared on the Scottish borders as a mild insult at the end of the seventeenth century. As early as the 1770s the term resonated slightly differently in the revolutionary setting of North America in a rallying song, 'Yankee Doodle Dandy' – a dandy defined first by his fashion *faux-pas*:

> Yankee Doodle came to town
> Riding on a pony
> Stuck a feather in his hat
> And called it Macaroni!

Although remembered today as a folksy American anthem, the song was composed by the British troops – many of them Londoners – to poke fun at the American colonists and their 'variegated, ill-fitting and incomplete' uniforms. The British soldiers thought they were better dressed. The Macaroni style they sang about referred to a new, urbane and affected style in London, inspired by French and Italian fashions – the sort of

metropolitan chic to which the colonists might never aspire. The London Macaronis, sometimes known as dandies, headed a craze that didn't last long. Nothing kills a fashion faster than ridicule, especially a fashion among men. The red high-heeled shoes, coloured wigs and make-up of the Macaronis, as worn by the youthful Charles James Fox, had the power to shock but not to endear or endure. The Macaronis soon disappeared, but one idea of the dandy remained: an urban peacock. 'Dandy', when used to describe the Macaronis, was quite near its current meaning as a term for a somewhat overdressed man.

The song 'Doodle Dandy' meanwhile, like the colonies, was lost by the British to the Americans, who took over the tune but rewrote the lyrics:

> Yankee Doodle keep it up,
> Yankee Doodle Dandy,
> Mind the music and the step
> And with the girls be handy.

'Dandy' shifted straight away in meaning to stand for approbation and approval, with overtones here of military style and heterosexual swagger, 'with the girls be handy'. 'Dandy' was a style that could also assert the wearer's manliness. Dandies flaunted themselves, which was always attractive to some. Dandies challenged the orthodoxy that put women, and their fashions, in the sphere of useless show, and men, and their clothes, in that of sober utility, and this radicalism was also potentially sexually attractive. The revolutionary songsters, having stolen the song, continued with their argument:

> And there was Captain Washington
> And gentlefolks about him,
> They say he's grown so tarnal proud
> He will not ride without 'em.

The first president was taking on kingly airs, had 'got him on his meeting clothes' and even had 'flaming ribbons in his hat'. He rode, separate from his troops, 'upon a slapping stallion',

surrounded by gentlefolk. The meaning of 'dandy' was shifting yet again.

'Dandy', therefore, is introduced into the language in 'Yankee Doodle' – a song for men – with the three meanings it has carried since. First, it is used to ridicule provincialism and lack of strength, as revealed in clothes: Yankee Doodle Dandy has only a pony and thinks a feather in his hat turns him into a man-about-town. Then the idea is expanded to approve of dandies 'keeping it up' with the girls, and finally the idea of the dandy is used to mock the overdressed Washington; as a way to ridicule, but this time to ridicule the exclusive pretensions of an envied member of an upper class. 'Dandy' can be levied as compliment and insult to all the many vanities of men. Dandies are ~~Mac~~aronis, sexual adventurers, soldiers, chinless wonders, or all these things. Brummell's life described these various qualities also; to some he was Don Juan, to others a fop. He was briefly a soldier and always a poseur. Brummell himself saw one of the perennial shifts in the meaning of the word, from the positive to a term of derision. He was initially happy to be described as a dandy, just as he was to be called 'Buck' at school, and 'Beau' as a young man. But the dandy craze that followed in his wake, in London, then Paris and beyond, grew in his lifetime to such ridiculous proportions – men so tightly collared that they could not see their feet – that Brummell sought to distance himself from the term. His dandyism, moreover, invoked more than clothes: it was a way of being.

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'Leader of Fashion' was, then, maybe not so poor a compromise for the Greater London Council. Brummell was a catalyst and a role model in a fashion revolution with an impact on the way we dress to this day. He was at the centre of what fashion historians have termed 'The Great Masculine Renunciation' when men turned their backs on highly decorative dress and took to nuances of cut, fit and proportion – in keeping with a revolutionary and neo-classical age, to express status, strength and sensitivity. From Brummell's time on, 'gentlemen would communicate with one another through the subtleties of tailoring, in a language that

would seem not merely foreign but totally incomprehensible to those who were not gentlemen'. They would also, largely, wear blue, black and white. To put modern man into white shirt, clean linen, trousers and dark jacket might have been sufficient, as one recent writer remarked, to secure Brummell's fame, and his rules of dress have dominated male power-dressing ever since. Without Brummell there would be no suit, for men or, indeed, women, or tailoring in the Savile Row, Wall Street or, some have argued, in the Chanel sense. Modern fashion has one of its founding fathers in Brummell. The tailored look that has developed out of his style, however, he created in an unorthodox way – it has even been said in a very British way: he was a maverick who created rules. Where those rules, colours and ideas came from is one story in Brummell's life: the collage of Eton colours, military cloth, Hussar trousers, neo-classical aesthetics and the sexually flamboyant West End. It is a public story but also a very personal one. In this sense Brummell reveals himself to be in spirit an artist: his person attracted ideas and developing truths without his necessarily understanding or controlling them. He became a symbol for a new mode of urbane masculinity, while it was precisely his masculinity that was possibly the most complex, troubled and compelling aspect of his personality.

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Brummell – the man and the name – has been a lodestar for paradoxes even before his defenders and detractors added layers of confusion. Even within his own lifetime, Brummell's name attracted stories and ideas that related more to his fame or notoriety than to the truth. It was commonly believed that he had brought the censure of the prince regent on his head by lounging on an ottoman in Carlton House and demanding of his royal host, 'Wales! Ring the bell!' It never happened. Brummell's attempts to deny the story were in vain. Like a modern celebrity, his image – the insouciant, audacious, stylish brat – had a power of its own that battled hopelessly with truth. He did not have a different tailor for each digit of his gloves, as some suggested, or wear fur coats to the opera, but the dandy craze took on its own

Gothic proportions after Brummell's demise and his name became a logo for a movement he no longer controlled.

One might have thought that there was scale enough in his elegant profligacy to render exaggeration obsolete. He did take hours to dress. He did change his linen with a regularity that shocked contemporaries, though it might not us. He did squander more money in a single night than most of his countrymen would earn in a lifetime. He did ask the prince regent's companion, 'Who's your fat friend?' and did declaim languorously when asked if he ate vegetables that he believed he 'may once have eaten a pea'. Like Oscar Wilde, who was celebrated enough to tour America long before he had had a single West End success, Brummell was renowned as a metropolitan wit before his personal style was copied by Londoners, Parisians and thence by urbane men the world over. His is also a story of fame, impure and simple, before it is an exploration of fashion.

Only partially did Brummell understand his celebrity. It was a new and an alarming construct in Regency London, a city with a hungry, irreverent press and a new leisured class opening a public discourse on how to spend their money. Even had he wished to marshal his fame to any higher good, there were personal tragedies – addiction and disease – that eclipsed Brummell's fame and his position, as Dr Johnson put it, as the '*arbiter elegantarium* – the judge of propriety' in dress and manners. Brummell's was a rake's progress in the Hogarthian style, and many contemporaries saw in his decline into poverty and madness the necessary third act to youthful excess. We may judge less harshly today but his life unavoidably describes a tragic parabola that might make his end seem inevitable. Of course it was not.

Brummell's father probably saw a political career for his second son. His schoolfriends thought he would do well. One London season it looked as if he would marry an heiress. Some said he should have been a writer. What Brummell actually *did*, as Virginia Woolf once said, was perhaps less important than what he stood for, and came to stand for.

His life spans a transformation in fashion, but also in British

society and in the history of London, and a crucial period in the making of modern manners and masculinity. The tragic arc of his life took him through a wide spectrum of society, not exactly coming from nowhere but certainly plumbing the depths as well as scratching the top-lights of existence. But he came to symbolise a new attitude in response to urban existence. He was indifferent to politics, above the vagaries of fashion, sought only to be envied and to make people laugh, and accrued around his person a cult based on his perceived personality. He was a celebrity in the first age when such a term was used. He has been cited as one of the models for Byron's *Don Juan*, not so much because he was sexually predatory – he was not – but rather because of his emotional detachment, his archness and a personal attractiveness cruelly mixed with misanthropy. His relationship to *Don Juan*'s and to Byron's style was also, notably, his wit. He had a stage-honed ear for comic cadence and the well-placed line. Brummell learned this at school, as a regular theatregoer and, quite possibly, as a participant at the family dining-table with his parents' theatrical associates, Richard Brinsley Sheridan and Thomas Harris. Contemporaries inevitably struggled to define and describe the joy of an encounter with Brummell: the humour of a moment, the twinkle of manner that only occasionally married itself with verbal wit as fits the page. Nevertheless, they knew instinctively that this was the key to Brummell's personal allure, his appeal and power. In a self-doubting but wildly sociable milieu – the high society of a fast-changing world capital – Brummell's indefinable something was to be self-confident, and self-evidently great company.

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There is no satisfactory portrait of Beau Brummell. Three miniatures exist, one oil on ivory, the others reproduced in earlier works on Brummell, and there is one highly unflattering cartoon, one etching and some interesting family paintings from Brummell's boyhood. There was never a Thomas Lawrence portrait, a Romney or a Gainsborough; and the Joshua Reynolds picture in the Iveagh Collection was painted when Brummell was three.

That the most famous figure in London deliberately avoided portraiture in adult life is psychologically and culturally fascinating in itself. Brummell seems to have had some awareness that his fame outstripped his ability to live up to it in reproduced form, and that only the live event, the 'happening' – as Warhol might have said – of an encounter with Beau Brummell could match expectations. This leaves the writers in his wake with the dual problem of defining the man, and also the effect he had on others: his widely acknowledged but ill-defined 'presence', in the absence of a clear image. Fortunately the many records of Brummell in the memoirs of the period attempt, in lively detail, to record his physical presence as well as the effect of his charm. To meet Brummell was never to forget him. 'This man,' wrote one contemporary, 'possessed such a powerful intellect that he reigned even more by his presence than his words.' But his presence defied easy portraiture as surely as his visage: to some he was outrageous or ridiculous, to others a paragon of gentlemanly propriety. 'One of the dandy's main characteristics,' wrote the same contemporary, was 'never to do what [was] expected of him.' And Brummell must be applauded at least for his ability to surprise. But if he had charm, humour, style and wit, he was also unbearable to be with when the mood took him or the occasion brought his displeasure. He could be cruel, condescending and dismissive. Yet oddly few took against him for long: 'he displeased too generally not to be sought after'.

The search for the man behind the 'Beau' façade has therefore been entertaining as well as frequently frustrating. It has encompassed memoirs and diaries, country-house and royal archives, letters and tailors' accounts, wine merchants and snuff shops, fabric archives and an asylum. Brummell has been a beguiling companion on the journey: not the cold fish of legend, but warm, complex, evasive often, pretentious and annoying frequently, brilliantly witty with revivifying regularity and chillingly tragic. But never dull. His sardonic voice is audible in much of what he said and wrote, and in many of the anecdotes that collected around his name, and he has been, as a result, slippery.

He rarely said anything directly, or without taking the opportunity to make an elaborate comedic meander. He refused to take anything very seriously, including, which is enormously to his credit, himself. He was a poseur and a social-climber, but acknowledged that much about himself and about the cruel realities of his world. As he admitted to Lady Hester Stanhope, 'If the world is so silly as to admire my absurdities, you and I may know better, but what does that signify?' She paid him the compliment in return of describing him as the cleverest man in London. But if he was willing to dismiss his absurdities, a roll-call of writers and artists, as well as Lady Hester, line up to insist we should not. Lord Byron, William Thackeray, Thomas Carlyle, Benjamin Disraeli, Charles Baudelaire, Honoré de Balzac, Albert Camus, Edith Sitwell, Max Beerbohm, Oscar Wilde, J. B. Priestley and Virginia Woolf have all felt drawn to reference Brummell in their understanding of the modern mind and manners. As one more recent essayist insists:

> If three things sum up our age they are science and technology, neo-liberal economics, and an infatuation with fashion and style. To understand the science [and economics] you must know . . . Darwin and . . . Adam Smith. To understand fully the importance of style and fashion and the instincts on which they rest, [an understanding of] Brummell is essential . . . The cult of celebrity, preoccupation with appearance, the new dandyism amongst men, the importance of 'attitude', the studied ironies of the post-modern era – all have their fore-echo in this astonishing [man].

But long before our time, indeed within a few years of Brummell's death, an amateur French philosopher was arguing that Brummell was instructive *not* in his achievements – as if fashion, manners and style were not in the realm of achievement – but rather he was instructive '*in his person*'.

The person of Brummell presents several paradoxes. Centrally intriguing is his sexuality. Even were it true – and it turns out it is very much *untrue* – that he was a sexless aesthete, 'cold, heartless and satirical', as one famous courtesan said – his image and legacy

are intensely sexualised. They exist in the mirror of male sexual vanity: how we dress, act, present ourselves, and interact with women and other men. Brummell was the central figure, and the term is apposite, in a new London 'look' that drew on some of the more obviously sexual aspects of Augustan art but developed into the suit for modern city life. The way men began to dress because of Brummell was an arresting corollary to the sea-change in attitudes to masculinity, and the debate over gentlemanly behaviour that reverberates in the novels of Jane Austen as much as the politics of the Enlightenment. It was a challenging time for men, a time when manners and codes of conduct were changing. For some, especially in London, it was also a sexually licentious age, and the fashions for both women and men reflected this. Women flaunted their bodies and so did men. Brummell was intensely scrutinised by men and by women 'the most admired man of all the belles and beaux of Society' and his fame was closely allied with a re-imagining of masculinity. So it is hardly surprising that his love-life was a subject for prurient conjecture at the time and subsequently – as, indeed, would be the case for a modern celebrity.

I should allow an instinctive suspicion of the idea that anyone, even the most ascetically stylish, is asexual: a position held by a surprising number of fashion writers and by some contemporaries about Brummell. His pre-eminence in the memoirs of the courtesans of the period begins to belie this, but one startling discovery made early in the research for this book gave Brummell a human face that immediately made sense of much of his later life. He died of tertiary syphilis. The asylum in France where he died – still a working institution – keeps files that date back to the eighteenth century. The retired director of the asylum, Professor Pierre Morel, has had a lifetime's interest in the history of the hospital, and one hot afternoon in a modern prefab office there, he pushed across a Formica table to me a copy of Brummell's medical records and his death certificate. The originals are in disputed ownership, and have not been accessible to historians of the period before now. 'General paralysis of the insane', and 'general

paresis' were used interchangeably at the period to signify dementia brought on by tertiary syphilis. The diagnosis was confirmed, in Professor Morel's opinion, by contemporary descriptions of Brummell. It is indeed bizarre that this diagnosis has never been conjectured before in any literature in English, but the Bon Sauveur medical records are unequivocal. The colour of Brummell's life shifted as a result of that discovery in Caen. If he was suffering from secondary, then tertiary syphilis through the 1820s and 1830s, then he contracted the disease at the height of his fame in London. Brummell's was indeed a rake's progress, but in a slightly more obvious, more human, more fallible and more libidinous way than previous writers have had access to imagine. At the same time, this is not a story of a disease, and Brummell has the right we all share not to be defined by his death, or to have the powerful image of an end foreshadowed in a sexual act overwhelm a life, on the whole, lightly lived.

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Although there were tragedies and physical horrors to be revisited in the research for this biography, there have also been joyous riches. This is perforce the case for any writer on this period, and any writer on Brummell's life in London in particular. It was a voluble and literary age. His contemporaries wrote voluminously and also recorded lengthy conversations in their diaries and memoirs in the form of dramatic dialogues. People spoke in long, complex sentences, on and off stage, as is evident from the plays and novels as well as the diaries and memoirs of contemporaries. It is only fitting, then, to use sources in their original form to give the flavour of Brummell's world and the context within which he spoke and acted. He made impact through his presence, some mixture of insolence, charm and half-expressed sexuality, but he was also a man of words. He chose to write them down himself only in later life, from which period many of his letters survive. Fortunately, though he had neither time nor inclination at the height of his fame to write, many of his contemporaries recorded what he said, where and when. Brummell appears in the memoirs of the courtesans Harriette Wilson and Julia Johnstone, in the