

FROM BROADWAY TO JASNA-NY: APPLAUSE FOR IAN KELLY

Ian Kelly —starring on Broadway in “The Pitman Painters” and featured as Hermione’s father in the newest Harry Potter movie — spent his Monday evening off on November 15 with 75 JASNA-NY members in yet another of his roles, that of acclaimed biographer and social historian.



Joyce Melitto, Ian Kelly

“The characters I write about come at history from an unusual direction,” he said, a factor reflected in the three biographies that the Cambridge and UCLA graduate has published: *Beau Brummell: The Ultimate Dandy* (subtitled “The Ultimate Man of Style” in American editions); *Cooking for Kings*, a work on Napoleon’s chef, Antonin Careme,; and, most recently, *Casanova: Actor Lover Priest Spy*.

Kelly addressed for JASNA the ever-fascinating George “Beau” Brummell, arbiter of fashion and social status in the Regency, inventor of the gentleman’s suit, the first “serial shopper,” an inveterate (and ultimately unlucky) gambler, and the favorite, then the victim, of the Prince Regent. Lord Byron attested to his significance when he declared that of the three great men of the age —Napoleon, Brummell, and himself — “the greatest of all is Brummell.”

Details of Beau’s life never fail to titillate: Consider, for example, his illegitimate birth to the mistress of the secretary to the Prime Minister (Lord North) in the servant’s quarters of what is now #10 Downing Street. (North ultimately persuaded the parents to marry). At his father’s death, Brummell inherited an immense fortune and estate, which he proceeded to squander and gamble away – but with style. He had affairs with many, if not most, of the famous and infamous sirens of his age.

Kelly’s most notable “find” was Brummell’s medical records, discovered unexpectedly in the French lunatic asylum where he died. Brummell was afflicted with tertiary syphilis, which his physicians described in painstakingly accurate detail, revealing symptoms relatively unknown or denied before. Although some treatments for the dreaded sexually transmitted disease were offered at the time—such as the so-called mercury “cure”—symptoms might fade, but the infection remained, and victims rarely survived to the final stage. Brummell’s delusions of attending wild parties in his asylum with celebrities from his past attest to the prevalence of bipolar disorder in advanced syphilis.

Kelly believes the strict and repressive social and sexual rules of the Victorian age arose from widespread shame and attempts to suppress knowledge of the disease in all social classes after the Napoleonic wars, even among some of the royals. This rarely acknowledged but widespread characteristic of the “underbelly” of Regency England accounts for tales, real and fictional, of violent and depressed behavior among sufferers, whose ailment was feared and hidden.

Mr. Kelly— immensely charming and exceedingly well informed —ranks as one of the most winning speakers JASNA-NY has hosted. He signed copies of his books and chatted graciously after his memorable presentation.

—Elsa Solender