

W. Jackson Bate
John Keats

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Biography



John Keats

by

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HAYDON'S LIFE MASK OF KEATS

To
Douglas Bush

Preface



THE LIFE OF KEATS provides a unique opportunity for the study of literary greatness and of what permits or encourages its development. The interest is thus deeply human and moral, and in the most capacious sense of both of these words. For, to begin with, we have to do with a type of poetic genius that—whatever the handicaps or restrictions with which Keats starts—quickly acquires a personal relevance to a wide variety of readers. We find the steady growth of qualities of both mind and character that are equally appropriate to other forms of achievement, and that are at the same time being practically and dramatically tested in Keats's daily experience from the age of twenty-one to the end of his short life. The development of his technical craftsmanship as a poet proceeds simultaneously, a growth that interests us all the more because it is not something separate but, as it were, partly a by-product—at least an organically related accompaniment—of his larger, more broadly humane development. This is one of the reasons why, for over a century, Keats has continued to strike so many readers—and writers—as the most Shakespearean in character of all poets since Shakespeare himself.

The story of his development has the further interest that it takes place in a relatively modern setting. We are thus able to find out at least something to help us in considering two problems that puzzle many of us. The first is that (again as with Shakespeare, about whose life we know so little) not much is apparently given at the start—very little indeed when compared with the education and what are ordinarily called “advantages” that have been lavished on some millions of people (many of them highly gifted) even in the relatively short period since 1800. We naturally wonder how it was done: how so much was done in so many different ways—what helped and what hindered. Aside from this broad educational interest, there is a special one that grows sharper with each

generation. It is a commonplace that poetry and indeed all the arts have seemed to become increasingly specialized or restricted throughout the last two hundred and fifty years, and especially during the twentieth century. We face even more directly the problem that was widely discussed throughout the fifty years before Keats was born and also throughout his lifetime: where are the Homers and Shakespeares, the "greater genres"—the epic and dramatic tragedy—or at least reasonable equivalents? How much of this is to be explained by the modern premium on originality—by the vivid awareness of what the great art of the past has achieved, and by the poet's or artist's embarrassment before that rich amplitude? The pressure of this anxiety and the variety of reactions to it constitute one of the great unexplored factors in the history of the arts since 1750. And in no major poet, near the beginning of the modern era, is this problem met more directly than it is in Keats. The question of the way in which Keats was somehow able, after the age of twenty-two, to confront this dilemma, and to transcend it, has fascinated every major poet who has used the English language since Keats's death and also every major critic since the Victorian era.

Finally, if we want to make use of it, there is an available knowledge of Keats's life, once he reaches the age of twenty-two, quite as detailed as that for any major poet in any language at a comparable age. There are in fact times, after his most creative period begins, when we can follow him week by week if we really want to do so. Though the material for the earlier years is relatively meager, even here we have one advantage. For at least his early poetry survives almost complete, whereas longer-lived poets have had a chance to suppress or dispose of their first trials. Few of us care to exhibit the awkwardnesses of our adolescence either to ourselves or to others. Admittedly most of Keats's earlier poetry is interesting as poetry only to the specialist in the psychology of styles, including the styles of stock expressions, or to the fellow writer, healthfully reassured that an imaginative and mental endowment so impressive should itself have begun as haltingly as many of us secretly do and then try to forget. But the story quickly picks up afterwards. And shortly after Keats has reached the age of twenty-two (Chapters X and XI) we find ourselves on a level of thinking (and, within another year, a level of expression) habitual to only the very greatest writers.

All of these more general interests have been active concerns of this particular biography, however inadequately any one of them has been pursued. There was also some thought that the justification for still another book on Keats existed even if one merely tried to bring together the new biographical material that has become known since the second World War. The last really full-length biography was that of Amy Lowell, published a generation ago (1925), although since that time other books, including the more condensed biography by Dorothy Hewlett, have incorporated further details. Moreover, in the years that followed the biography by Amy Lowell, discussions and reconsiderations of Keats have often mirrored an unhappy characteristic of our specialized generation: those concerned with biographical details are often less interested in the criticism of the writer's principal works. Conversely the more specialized studies of Keats's writing—indeed of any major author's work—have often been written with far less interest in the biography, or even in the general drama of the human achievement, than in particular aspects of his individual works (sources, recurring themes, psychoanalytic preoccupations, or the various forms of stylistic analysis). The present writer, however much he prizes amplitude and diversity as ideals, could hardly hope to present the fruits of every previous analysis of the poems or argue the possible inferences at every stage. But I have made an effort to retain a reasonable openness of approach to most of them, especially after the greater writing of Keats finally begins.

A note may be added about the discussion of particular poems—not the casual mention of the earlier verse, which it can be assumed is necessarily brief (perhaps not brief enough), but the discussion of the major poems beginning with *Hyperion*, and especially of the poems from the odes to the *Fall of Hyperion*. These poems have for years been the subject of the most detailed analyses. When one loves a thing, one is always tempted to discuss it as fully as one can, especially when the very essence of the appeal of the subject is its own amplitude and debatability, its diversity and richness of implication. But the attempt to discuss the poems here, within the confines of a biography—though these are the poems that have interested me most over the past twenty-five years—has naturally had to be limited. Such poems could not be fully explicated as though each one, or a group of them, were the sole concern of the book. For much of the context of Keats's life

and writing that is most relevant to each major poem has necessarily, in a biography, been already dealt with in a chronological way and to that extent separately. To summarize it again when every important work is considered would lead to an intolerable amount of repetition. Even so I have doubtless been guilty of too much repetition when a major poem or a particular period of Keats's life is being considered. The only excuse—or explanation if not an excuse—is that Keats's development, however rapid, is by no means linear. Linear developments exist only to a perception in which diagnosis is hurried by the heat of argument or kept simple by lack of all but a few obvious facts. Keats's development naturally circles and eddies. He constantly goes back, even in his short life, to premises and values, or to the challenges or impressions, of a year before—or two or three years before—and then reconsiders, ramifies, and begins again, as indeed we all do, though often in a slower progression.

In order to reduce the number of footnotes, I have simply referred in the text, whenever it could be done easily, to the dates of Keats's letters. The date, in each case, is that assigned the letter in Hyder Rollins' authoritative edition; the reader can refer immediately to the appropriate letter in Rollins by means of the date. Keats's hurried and idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation are followed in almost every case. The text used for the poems is in general the standard edition by H. W. Garrod (1939). Exceptions are made in the case of poems quoted directly from the *Letters*.

Acknowledgments are numerous if a writer frankly hopes to include or distill material from earlier works. Since the standard biographies of Sir Sidney Colvin (1917) and Amy Lowell (1925), a great deal of material has been made available. Of special value is the material published by my late colleague Hyder Rollins in the *Keats Circle* (1948), which printed hitherto unpublished manuscripts from the Houghton Library at Harvard, from the Morgan Library, and from other collections. Later publications of Rollins, culminating in his memorable edition of Keats's *Letters* (1958), published just after his death, help fill out the picture further, especially in the redating of some of Keats's letters. I have hoped to take advantage of this material, while supplementing it with whatever might be gained from a free access to Rollins' sources in the Houghton Library and elsewhere.

Since this biography was planned as a companion publication to Rollins' edition of the *Letters*, the endpapers of that edition, which provide helpful maps of London and the London area of Keats's time, are reproduced here.

I should also express my debt to the writings and in many cases the kind personal encouragement of the following: Professors Willard Pope of the University of Vermont, Claude Finney of Vanderbilt University, Earl Wasserman of Johns Hopkins, J. C. Stillinger of Illinois, Harold Bloom of Yale, Miss Dorothy Hewlett, the late Professors H. W. Garrod of Oxford and Clarence Thorpe of Michigan, and the late Mr. Louis Holman of Boston, to whose collection and careful chronology of Keats, now at Harvard, every writer on Keats's life during the last forty years has been indebted either directly or indirectly. Thanks are also due to Professor Geoffrey Tillotson and to Miss Carol Landon of the University of London, for helping me to find out a little more about the finances of the Keats family; to Professors David Owen and Alex Gerschenkron of Harvard, and Professor Albert Imlah of Tufts University, for help in estimating the cost of living in Keats's time as compared with the present day; and to Signor Gino Doria, Chairman of the Art Galleries of the Naples area, for giving me some details relevant to Keats's final months in Italy.

The curators of the three principal Keats collections have been especially generous in their help: Miss Mabel Steele, of the Keats Collection of the Houghton Library at Harvard; Signora Vera Cacciatore, of the Keats-Shelley Memorial House in Rome; and Mr. William R. Maidment, of the Keats Memorial House, Hampstead. I also wish to thank them, as well as the authorities of the National Portrait Gallery and the Dedham Historical Society, for permission to reproduce the illustrations.

Among many colleagues and former teachers at Harvard who have befriended my effort to understand Keats over the last twenty-five years, I should mention in particular the late Professor John Livingston Lowes; the late Professor Hyder Rollins, to whose definitive editions I have already mentioned my obligation (and that of any student of Keats henceforth); Professor Herschel Baker, whose authoritative work on Hazlitt has recently appeared; Professor Harry Levin, who has taught me much about the history of critical theory, and Professors Archibald MacLeish and I. A. Richards, to whose writings and general conversation over the years I

owe so much. My use of the fine study of the major romantic poets by Professor David Perkins is mentioned in the discussion of Keats's odes as well as elsewhere; and I also thank him for the care with which he went over many of the chapters of this book. To Professor Douglas Bush my debt was already large when I was a beginning student and attempted a small undergraduate thesis, published under the title of *Negative Capability* (1939), on Keats's conception of the poetic character. However jejune that youthful effort, the aspirations that had led me to try to write it in the first place were encouraged by him in the years that followed, during most of which I was occupied with a variety of tasks and, occasionally, with writing on different subjects. Now, after almost twenty-five years, I wish I could better express what I owe to this humanist whose range and vision, in approaching literature from the Greeks to the present day, subsume so close a knowledge of detail that even the specialist, restricting himself to a single period, still turns to it for authority. The only way in which I can express my own thanks, however inadequately, is by inscribing this book to him.

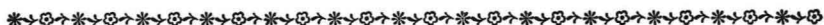
W. J. B.

Cambridge, Massachusetts
January 1963

Preface to the Third Printing

Typographical errors and some statements of fact were corrected in the second printing (1964) and a few more in this printing. Since the publication of this book, further light has been thrown on the finances of the Jennings and Keats families by Robert Gittings, in *The Keats Inheritance* (1964). A few changes have been made to bring the short discussion here more closely in line with new details discovered by Mr. Gittings, and I also use this occasion to refer the reader generally to his detailed study of the subject.

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From a cast belonging to the author

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24. EXTERIOR OF FINGAL'S CAVE, STAFFA

An engraving in the Holman Collection, Harvard

25. CHARLES BROWN IN 1828

*The bust by Andrew Wilson in the Keats Memorial House, Hampstead
(photograph by Christopher Oxford, copyright Hampstead Borough Council)*

26. WENTWORTH PLACE

A photograph in the Holman Collection, Harvard

27. THREE SCENES OF KEATS'S FAVORITE WALK NEAR WINCHESTER

*A photograph of the cathedral and two photographs by F. Holland Day
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28. JOHN KEATS IN JULY 1819

The pencil drawing by Charles Brown in the National Portrait Gallery

29. MINIATURE OF FANNY BRAWNE

*A photograph in the F. Holland Day Collection, Dedham Historical Society
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An engraving in the Holman Collection, Harvard

32. KEATS ON HIS DEATHBED

The drawing by Joseph Severn in the Keats-Shelley Memorial House, Rome

ABBREVIATED TITLES

References merely to volume and page numbers, without title, are to *The Letters of John Keats*, ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (1958). In cases where there might be some ambiguity, the word *Letters* is included in the reference.

Brawne	<i>Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats</i> , ed. F. Edgcombe (1937).
Brown	Charles Armitage Brown, <i>Life of John Keats</i> , ed. Dorothy Bodurtha and Willard B. Pope (1937).
Colvin	Sir Sidney Colvin, <i>John Keats, His Life and Poetry, His Friends, Critics, and After-Fame</i> , 3rd ed. (1920).
Finney	Claude Lee Finney, <i>The Evolution of Keats's Poetry</i> , 2 vols. (1936).
Garrod	<i>The Poetical Works of John Keats</i> , ed. H. W. Garrod (1939).
Gittings	Robert Gittings, <i>John Keats: The Living Year</i> (1954).
Hampstead Keats	<i>The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats</i> , ed. Harry Buxton Forman, revised by Maurice Buxton Forman, 8 vols. (1938-1939).
Haydon, <i>Diary</i>	<i>The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon</i> , ed. Willard B. Pope, 5 vols. (1960-1963).
Hewlett	Dorothy Hewlett, <i>A Life of John Keats</i> , 2nd ed. (1949).
KC	<i>The Keats Circle</i> , ed. Hyder E. Rollins, 2 vols. (1948).
KSMB	<i>Keats-Shelley Memorial Bulletin</i> (Rome).
Lowell	Amy Lowell, <i>John Keats</i> , 2 vols. (1925).
<i>Recollections</i>	Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, <i>Recollections of Writers</i> (1878).
Sharp	William Sharp, <i>The Life and Letters of Joseph Severn</i> (1892).

