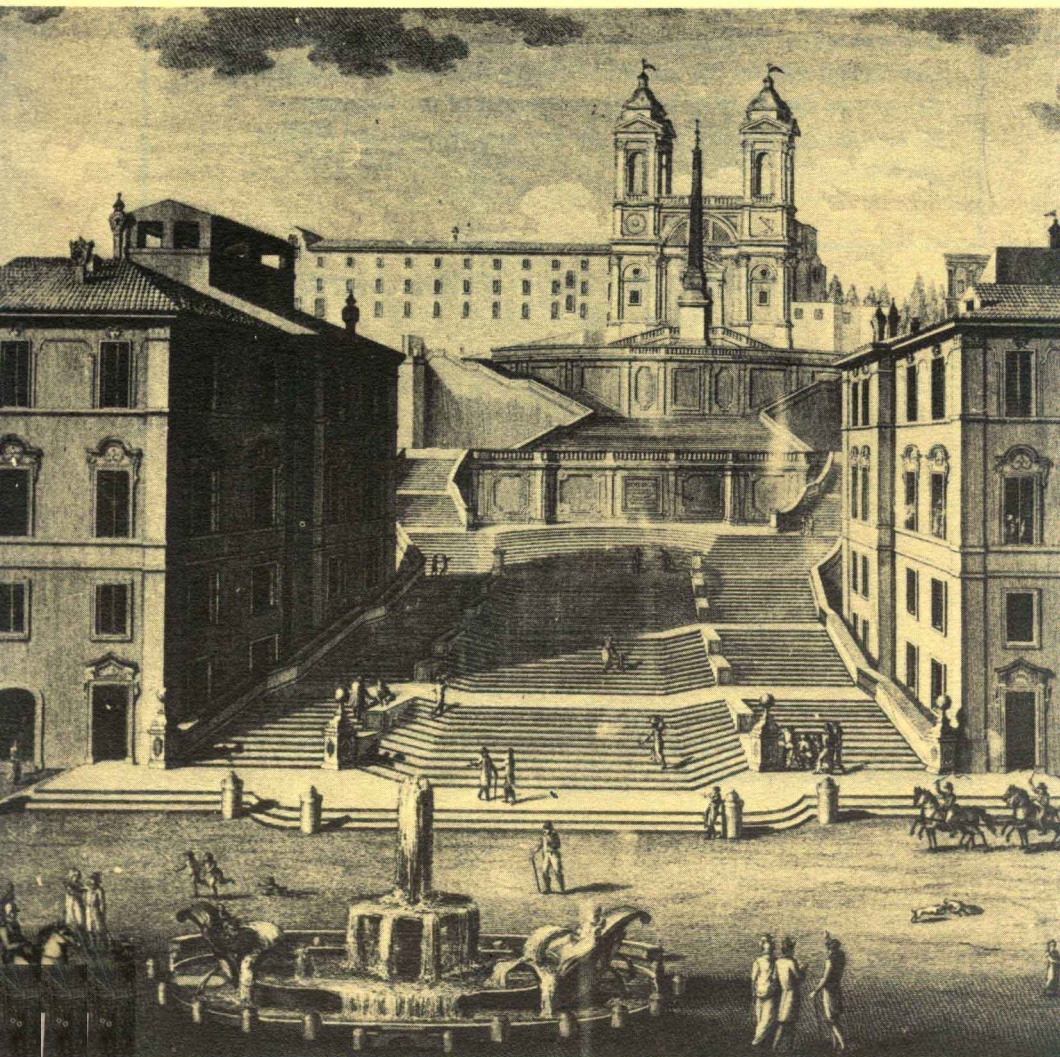


THE KEATS-SHELLEY REVIEW



AUTUMN 1990

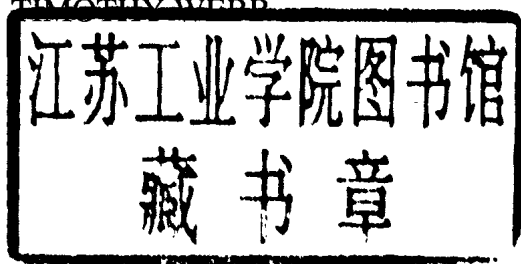
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*A message from Sir Joseph Cheyne on his retirement from the
Keats-Shelley Memorial Association:*

It is of course with great regret that I have left the Keats-Shelley Memorial House in Rome; but I carry away with me the memory of all the support I received as Curator from the Committees in London and Rome and from the Custodian, Adamo Novelli, and the many secretaries who helped me, notably Denise del Guidice.

I must, in particular, thank the Committee, Members and Friends of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association for the splendid party they gave me at Keats House in Hampstead and Tina Gee who organized it. Also for their generosity in presenting me with the copy of 'Poems from Italy' which took me back so many years and with the very handsome cheque which allowed me to buy a television, so necessary on an isolated Shetland island. These presents will always be with me – even the television, I hope – as well as the thoughts of all those kind people who sustained and encouraged us over the years, now that my Keats-Shelley adventure is sadly over.

Joe Cheyne
N. Yell, Shetland Islands.
August 1990

KEATS-SHELLEY REVIEW

KEATS-SHELLEY MEMORIAL ASSOCIATION

Annual Report: 1 September 1989–31 August 1990

Sadly I have to report the death of Mr Michael Elphick who was Vice-Chairman of the Rome Committee when he died after a short illness in the summer of this year. Mr Elphick had been a valued member of the Rome Committee for many years. He will be greatly missed.

It has been an important year for the Association. Our Curator, Sir Joseph Cheyne, retired in April. He had then been in charge of the Memorial House for fourteen years. Few Englishmen can have known Rome better than he did; and few Englishmen can have been better known there. Sir Joseph first arrived in Rome as a soldier in World War II. Staying on after the war ended he became an established diplomat at our Embassy there, retiring in 1976 as First Secretary (Information). He was awarded the OBE. Then at an age when many would seek permanent retirement he commenced his new career as our Curator. He will be particularly remembered for his skill in building up 'the gate' at the House (and thereby its income). He was most successful too in introducing the work of the English Romantic Poets to a wider public in Italy through the lectures and seminars he organized. We thank him for all he did for the House and wish him a happy retirement.

Sir Joseph has been succeeded in office by Miss Bathsheba Abse. Miss Abse is the daughter of Mr Leo Abse, the former well-known M.P., and the niece of his brother the poet. Your Committee regards itself as extremely fortunate in having obtained the services of Miss Abse. Although still young, she has had admirable experience and training as an Assistant Curator at the Victoria and Albert Museum. She knows Italy well and speaks Italian with fluency.

In my Report last year I referred to the major repairs that had been completed to the exterior of the Memorial House. It is agreeable to be able to say that these repairs were completed 'within time and within budget' – in my experience an unusual achievement where building work is concerned. The cost of these repairs was over £70,000 – a considerable strain on the Association's finances. It was to restore these, as well as to meet the cost of further work required *inside* the House and to increase

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the Endowment, that The Appeal was launched in 1988. To date over £100,000 has been raised.

This money derives from various sources; from individual donors in Britain, from sympathizers in Italy, from the Keats-Shelley Association of America, but most of all from the two fundraising occasions organized by Mrs Polizzi, our Appeal Chairman. These were a dinner at his Embassy hosted by H.E. The Italian Ambassador at which H.R.H. Princess Margaret was the guest of honour, and the Charity Preview of the Grosvenor House Antiques Fair at which H.R.H. The Princess of Wales was guest of honour. Our debt to Mrs Polizzi is very great. We thank her first of all; and we thank the many others who have supported The Appeal so generously.

I conclude by mentioning that the Annual Lecture at Keats House, Hampstead, was given in the summer by Professor Arnold Orza, from Richmond College, U.S.A. and by reminding readers that the Bicentenary of P.B. Shelley's birth falls in 1992. Your Committee is already active in planning a worthy commemoration.

ABINGER
Acting Chairman

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Sir Joseph Cheyne

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SIR JOSEPH CHEYNE AT THE KEATS-SHELLEY MEMORIAL HOUSE, 1977-1990

Anyone who has yet to visit the Keats-Shelley Memorial House in Rome has a treat in store. It figures in one of the most justly celebrated views of the city, standing at the foot of the Spanish Steps which are crowned by the pinnacles of the Trinità dei Monti at the top. In front of the House is the Piazza di Spagna, with a Bernini fountain in the midst of its traffic-free cobblestones. On the first floor of the House is the public museum and library. The room where Keats died is cool and peaceful: a window looks out on the Steps, and a lulling murmur penetrates the interior like the sound of a fountain, though it is actually the conversation of tourists sunning themselves below the casement. I have always been glad of a pretext to visit the House, and one day in April 1988 I had an appointment there with Sir Joseph Cheyne. Standing on the far side of the Piazza I took the view once more, crossed to the House, walked up the simple and dignified stone stairs, and knocked at the heavy door. It was opened by Adamo, a tall, sombre-looking but kindly man in a heavy dark suit, who seems to remember as a friend anyone who has once visited. Our greetings were muted and brief, because to my left, in the light and airy main room of the museum, Sir Joseph was talking to a party of school-children, apparently nearing the end of their visit. He was recounting incidents from the life of Keats, quoting poems and, drawing on the wisdom of his years, kindly but critically summing up the youthful characters of the poet and his contemporaries. What shone out was his enthusiasm for the poetry and his belief in its continuing power to satisfy and to inspire. The packed room was hushed. I had caught a spell-binder at his magic. We left the children examining books, pictures and mementoes, and crossed the Piazza to a little bar to discuss over coffee and hot chocolate the conference that was about to begin. I have many other memories of Sir Joseph but I value this one because it was a glimpse of the normal, everyday work he did at the House, just as important as the conferences and tours and special events, and the foundation on which they were built.

Now that he has retired, it is time to commemorate what he did, and necessary to think first about who and what he is. You cannot help

relishing the full name, with trimmings: Major Sir Joseph Lister Watson Cheyne, Bart., C.B.E. Sir Joseph for short, Joe to his friends: a man of many parts. From a distinguished family, public school, an ancient university, war service in the army, and a career in the Diplomatic Service ending as Press Secretary at the British Embassy in Rome. London Club: Boodle's. Impeccable manners and accent, neither of which is disguised when he happens to be speaking fluent Italian. A tall spare figure, dressed in a dark-blue three-piece suit with a red tie always perfectly knotted, taking the steep stairs up to the museum without checking his stride or his conversation, to re-open it punctually at two-thirty. Not a white hair out of place, a noble head with aquiline features, sensitive and mobile, expressing a rapidly changing sequence of moods: cheerfulness, worry, interest, sly humour. But always geniality and candour.

He was accustomed to representing Britain abroad, and proud to do so, before he ever became Curator at the House. Clearly, he is an Establishment figure, perfectly suited to be the custodian of what he described, in an article for *The Times* in 1985, as one of 'three long-standing institutions [which] uphold British traditions in Italy'. The other two were the British School at Rome and the British Institute at Florence. 'To step into one of these institutions', the article concludes, 'is – for all the sun, and the blue sky outside – to step into Britain. Long may they endure!' Excellent. But what the devil has such a patriot to do with radicals like Keats and Shelley?

Let us prevaricate. Sir Joseph is of the same social rank as Shelley, who would have been a baronet had he outlived his father. The lame Lord Byron's Freudian comment on Shelley, 'A more perfect gentleman never stepped across a drawing room', would fit Sir Joseph equally well. And then, Sir Joseph loves Italy, as Shelley did. But would Sir Joseph write, as Shelley did to Leigh Hunt: 'The system of society as it exists at present must be overthrown from its foundations with all its maxims and forms before we shall find anything but disappointment in our intercourse with any but a few select spirits'? Or 'O that the free would stamp the impious name/ Of KING into the dust!'? It seems unlikely.

Sir Joseph is of the old school, for whom the poets' politics were less important than they are for modern academics. This does not mean that he

rejected or censored anything, or anyone, who might throw light on 'his poets': openness was his hallmark. But his own perception of Keats and Shelley, though constantly modified, never lost its original shape. His Shelley is more like the one Matthew Arnold patronized and Eliot and Leavis rejected in the style of men with hangovers contemplating last night's empty bottles: a visionary who wrote like an angel. Still, the question remains. Is there a radical in Joe?

What there is, certainly, is an individualist, an outsider, an idealist, and an artist. Perhaps the outsider is the key. So far from being complacent in his credentials and achievements, he has the air of having been marked by some formative experience of dispossession. Donald Reiman will tell you there is no better pedigree for a Romantic. One might fancy that Sir Joseph was always searching in new forms for fragments of a lost paradise and infectiously delighted when he found them. In adult life, the truly representative expatriate in a paradise of exiles. Individualist: not just any public school but Stowe in a golden age, under a great liberal headmaster who used to call him, as he recalls with pleasure, 'my dear fellow!' Idealist: ditto. A hunger fuelled by his gift of dispossession, a disposition to yearn as well as learn, and fed by excellent teaching among some of the most beautiful buildings and grounds in England. There is an Establishment idealism, of course, for Queen and Country and for the custom and ceremony where innocence and beauty are born, as Yeats put it: as well as the idealism of the intellectual and the outsider. They can be opposed to each other but Sir Joe drew from them both with equal devotion. If there was a contradiction, his strength was to be apparently unaware of it. It showed itself, perhaps, not in conscious repudiation of either heritage but in restless energy, a tendency to fret till he got everything right.

And the artist? He has perfected the short speech as an art form, both in content and delivery. His prose is magnanimous, clear, and beautifully poised. With the occasional original metaphor where appropriate, discreet but imaginative. In his youth, he wrote a novel which he made no attempt to publish. He has lost it and thinks it was probably very bad. Modest man that he is, he would, wouldn't he? But suppose he is right. It takes a great deal of determination to write a novel in spare time. I wish I had written even a very bad novel.

All in all, radical or not (and I do not say he was not, for he is complex and the term problematic) Joe was definitely a Romantic – and still is. He wears his heart gracefully on his sleeve. And he read the Romantic poets, long before he came to the House, in his own time, with no ulterior motive, not even to pass exams: at Cambridge he ‘read’ History. He read the poets because he loved them. There could be no better qualification, surely, for interesting other people in their lives and works. Nor for refreshing with his enthusiasm academics who work in a hard-bitten environment where a love of poetry has become, too often, the love that dare not speak its name.

Put all that together with the Establishment figure, the patriot: add in a knowledge and love of the language and culture of Italy: and you get a totally unlikely combination – a freak. It was exactly a freak that ‘the Keats’ needed. The man and the job were made for each other. Anybody who met Joe in connection with the poets must have been struck and was probably moved by his evident unworldliness, and his belief not just in the value of Keats and Shelley but in their essential goodness. On the other hand, anyone in an institution that might be pressed to provide ‘the Keats’ with funds or assistance probably wanted to hide under the table. He was so persuasive, so charming, and so innocently remorseless. (Shelley: ‘I always go on until I am stopped. And I never am stopped’.) The exactly necessary freak.

It is hard for those of us who did not know the Memorial before Sir Joseph to realize quite how entirely he transformed it. Someone I am only at liberty to call ‘a source close to the House’ has kindly provided me with an outline of the story. Part of this document I will quote directly:

Sir Joseph arrived at the KSMH in 1977. He brought prestige to the House through Cultural Activities and collaboration with Italian academic circles, especially with Rome University (‘La Sapienza’) and Bologna University (Department of Foreign Modern Languages and Literature). Had it not been for these activities, Rotary Clubs might not have donated 50,000,000 lire towards the recently completed restoration work of the fabric of the House.

In 1976 . . . the capital held by the Association in Rome was largely dispersed. The rents in the House were blocked and income was barely adequate to keep the House open. An appeal had been launched in the UK but the capital and income were available only for capital improvements or projects in the House in Rome. Approximately £30,000 was raised.

By 1988 the financial situation of the Memorial House had radically changed. The number of visitors and sales in the House had risen, the visitors from 3,000 to approximately 11,000 per year. Rents had been raised and the House could now rely on a balanced budget and substantial reserves in hand.

The improvement in the affairs of the House has coincided with a great revival in interest in the Romantics in Italy certainly encouraged by our cultural activities. In 1976-77 no Italian school group visited the House: since 1987-88 the groups visiting have been over 100 per year.

The first major event of Sir Joseph's stewardship must have been one of the most spectacular. In collaboration with the Municipality of Rome, the House organized an exhibition on 'The English Romantic Poets and Italy'. This exhibition, mounted at the Palazzo Braschi, was visited by a staggering total of 27,000 people in the three months from December 1980. 'The success of the Exhibition was such', wrote Sir Joseph later,

that a lecture series was held at the British Council during the winter of 1981-82 to develop the same subject. These two events engendered much interest in the Younger Romantics, especially among Italian schools, so that the Association decided to hold a further series of four lectures in the spring of 1985 . . .

The title of the series, 'The Romantic Theatre', was chosen partly because this was a subject which had received comparatively little study in Italy and partly because there was a growing interest among undergraduate groups to present productions or readings of the plays of Shelley and Byron.

No one realized, when the series was planned, what a remarkable impact it would have. The accepted idea of the Romantic theatre was still one of lyric drama, difficult to produce and perform. To hear it described suddenly as modern, psychological drama, as the theatre of the mind, the 'theatre of violence', was so striking that the ripples are still washing the shore.

This series of lectures was published as a book in 1987, and my quotations come from Sir Joseph's foreword. Three more such series were organized between 1987 and 1989. Meanwhile, in the House itself, Sir Joseph and his staff undertook a complete cataloguing and reorganization of the library's 9,000 volumes, making it available as a valuable resource to scholars and students. 'For nearly eighty years, the House has been a place of pilgrimage', reads an English language leaflet before me, and earlier, 'The House today is a museum and library'. There is no date on this document but for 'today' we can read 'since 1977'. That was part of the transformation Sir Joseph effected. Not content with all this activity in Rome, he travelled throughout Italy speaking on the Romantics and advertizing the House in schools and universities. A beautifully printed leaflet in Italian, dated 1989, with seven full-colour illustrations, pays the curator a grateful tribute:

L'attività dell'Associazione spazia anche al di fuori delle mura della 'Casina Rossa': il suo direttore, Sir Joseph Cheyne, uomo di grande cultura ed appassionato studioso di storia e di letteratura inglese, porta continuamente la voce dei 'suoi poeti' in giro per l'Italia, con cicli di conferenze sempre affollatissime.

English readers with about my own rudimentary level of Italian may like to know that my dictionary has '*affollare* . . . to crowd, throng'. The Italian superlative form speaks for itself, *fortissimo*. And the whole passage makes me reflect that the language of Italy is as happy a medium in which to describe him as was its culture and climate for him to blossom into his Indian Summer.

In 1985 Anthony Johnson and Mario Curreli of the University of Pisa organized a conference on Shelley and Byron, with an accompanying exhibition which included many pictures and manuscripts from the