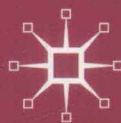




John Keats
A Literary Life



R. S. White



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Acknowledgments

Writing literary biography has been a new and alien discipline for me. Whereas a critical book may pursue a single theme like playing a melody on a single instrument, a life-story is multi-layered and symphonic in the sense that the writer's life, friendships, career 'false starts' and the literature are inextricably linked in equal complexity. At times I have taken liberties in sacrificing strict chronology for thematic continuity, though I hope it will be clear when and why this happens. Generally speaking I have tried to read Keats 'forwards' rather than with a sense of tragic hindsight, giving him the space to be young and full of schemes and hopes rather than doomed from the start. Since Keats is a writer who draws any reader very close into a kind of warm sense of intimate kinship through his letters as well as poems, my prime acknowledgment must be to him, and also his loyal friends who ensured the survival of his 'priest-like' words.

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This book in particular has forced me to dig down through various archaeological layers of my own life since in very real senses it has been gestating for over forty years. I only hope its scholarship has not dated so visibly as I have. To be asked to write it was a kind of fairy story. Long ago I wrote my undergraduate dissertation at Adelaide on Keats's poetry and ideas in the context of philosophies of organic unity in Romantic literature and art (all in 15,000 words!) and I was shepherded through this absurdly grandiose terrain by John Colmer whose supervision enforced on me the realisation that scholarship is not only an exacting craft but it can also be an elegant art. At the same time the brilliant critic and poet Geoffrey Thurley with infectious enthusiasm introduced me to a whole galaxy of modern writers

many of whom were Keats's heirs, and he made me feel that literature matters in a profound sense. I shared my own youthful excitement most often with Olga Marek (now Sankey). A little later, encouragement and help were offered by J. C. Maxwell, Barrie Bullen, Paul Hamilton and Ian Donaldson in my 'first go' at writing on Keats in a book which appeared as *Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare*, while Cathy Davidson who was all-important then, has also as Cathy Mulcahy been invaluable in her support now. During the fourteen happy years I spent lecturing at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, I shared mutual enthusiasms for Keats and other things with many people whose friendship has continued much longer, in particular Desmond Graham, John Pellowe, Ernst Honigmann, Nicola Fletcher, Rosie King (who discovered at the time that she is related to Keats), Bruce Babington, Peter Regan, Terry Norman and Jane Whiteley. More specifically, it was a joy to teach as 'Special Authors' first Blake and then Keats with Claire Lamont whose erudition matches her delighted affinity with the Romantics. Our classes were remarkable for attracting a group of students whose interest extended into their later professional lives with great distinction, in particular John Goodridge and Jon Mee. Both have sustained a close interest in this book to the very end. So has Rebecca Hiscock who shared with me the 'Keats Walk' in Winchester and has continued to guide me along that memorable path in imagination. I followed in Keats's footsteps through most of his journeys, beginning with Wentworth Place, now Keats House in Hampstead, the Isle of Wight, Winchester, the north and Scotland, to the moving experience of standing in the room where Keats died in Rome, now the Keats-Shelley House. The Lake District is for me identified not only with Wordsworth and the 'Lakers' but also with Keats and the 'Lavers' – the wonderful Pete Laver and Mags – as well as Sally Woodhead. Their friendship has been as glowing in my life as the fires we used to warm ourselves beside on winter nights in Sykeside Cottage, Grasmere. Robert Woof always offered affectionate strictures that no matter how ingenious an interpretation of lines of poetry may be, it has to take into account the specific circumstances of where a poet was and what he was doing and thinking at the time. Later Michael Rossington has shared his voluminous knowledge of Shelley and he, together with Deirdre Coleman and Clara Tuite, has encouraged me to think of myself as not only an early modernist but also a Romanticist.

At the University of Western Australia I have once again found sympathetic souls willing to share their thoughts about Keats: Hilary Fraser, Dennis Haskell, Judith Johnston, Veronica Brady, Andrew Lynch, John Kinsella, Emma Rooksby, Chris Wortham, generations of students, and more recently Danijela Kambascovic-Sawers and the maestro of editing Roger Bourke. Michael Levine is a philosopher who profoundly fuses expertise in the history of ideas with an urgent moral and political concern for the present, and he reassuringly finds this combination in Keats. Many other friends have offered not only decisive help in particulars but heart-warming

intellectual support, especially Maurice Whelan (child psychiatrist, biographer of Hazlitt, novelist, and poet) and Sam Pickering, the most distinguished and original essayist since Hazlitt. Thanks are also due to Christabel, Steven and Paula at Palgrave Macmillan for inviting me to write this book which, for all its deficiencies, has been a labour of pure love. The list could go on endlessly and I apologise for the many omissions but no acknowledgments would be complete without thanking once again Marina and Alana White and Pippi the pup, for invigorating every day for me with the simple joy of living.

Abbreviations

Allott	<i>Keats: The Complete Poems</i> (London: Longman, 1970)
Barnard	John Barnard (ed.), <i>John Keats: The Complete Poems</i> 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1977)
Brown	Charles Armitage Brown, <i>Life of John Keats</i> , ed. Dorothy Hyde Bodurtha and Willard B. Pope (London: Oxford University Press, 1937)
CCC	Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, <i>Recollections of Writers</i> (repr. Fontwell, Sussex: Centaur Press, 1969)
<i>Chronology</i>	<i>A Keats Chronology</i> , F. B. Pinion (London: Macmillan, Macmillan Author Chronologies, 1992)
<i>FB</i>	<i>Letters of Fanny Brawne to Fanny Keats [1820–1824]</i> , ed. Fred Edgumbe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936)
Gittings	Robert Gittings, <i>John Keats</i> (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968)
<i>Heritage</i>	<i>Keats: The Critical Heritage</i> , ed. G. M. Matthews (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971)
<i>JKL</i>	<i>The Letters of John Keats 1814–1821</i> , ed. Hyder Edward Rollins in 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958)
<i>KC</i>	<i>The Keats Circle: Letters and Papers and More Letters and Poems of the Keats Circle</i> , 2nd edn, 2 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965)

Note: Quotations from Keats's poetry are from Barnard, and those from Shakespeare, apart from ones directly quoted in Keats's words, are taken from *The Complete Works of Shakespeare: The Oxford Edition*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

Most of us, indeed, know little of the great originators until they have been lifted up among the constellations and already rule our fates ... Each of those Shining Ones had to walk on the earth among neighbours who perhaps thought much more of his gait and his garments than of anything which was to give him a title to everlasting fame: each of them had his little local personal history sprinkled with small temptations and sordid cares, which made the retarding friction of this course towards final companionship with the immortals.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ch. 15

[Writing biography] taught me at least two things. First, that the past is not simply 'out there', an objective history to be researched or forgotten, at will; but that it lives most vividly in all of us, deep inside, and needs constantly to be given expression and interpretation. And second, that the lives of great artists and poets and writers are not, after all, so extraordinary by comparison with everyone else. Once known in any detail and any scope, every life is something extraordinary, full of particular drama and tension and surprise, often containing unimagined degrees of suffering or heroism, and invariably touching extreme moments of triumph and despair, though frequently unexpressed. The difference lies in the extent to which one is eventually recorded, and the other is eventually forgotten.

Richard Holmes, *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer*, 208

... axioms are not axioms until they are proved upon our pulses: We read fine – things but never feel them to thee [sic] full until we have gone the same steps as the Author.

John Keats, letter to John Hamilton Reynolds
(JKL, 1, 279)

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1

‘He could not quiet be’

Keats reveals little information or even curiosity about his childhood. This is surprising. Many of his contemporary poets and writers were idealising childhood and exploring the links between the child and the adult. Jean-Jacques Rousseau saw the study of children as unlocking information about their later behaviour and personalities. Wordsworth in ‘Ode: Intimations of Immortality From Recollections of Early Childhood’ constructs a psychological model of a life cycle conceiving of human growth as a process of leaving a natural state of perception which will die away ‘And fade into the light of common day’. William Blake in his *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* explores the moral implications of naïvety and corruption in the passage from childhood to adulthood, while Coleridge in ‘Frost at Midnight’ in his words to ‘My babe so beautiful, it fills my heart / With tender gladness thus to look at thee’ anticipates a new ‘poetics of parenthood’. Even Hazlitt, whom it is hard to imagine ever having been a child, was so deeply influenced by the experience of losing a child that he was conscious of its effect on his adult perspective on death.¹ The few passing references Keats makes to children, apart from his own niece whom he never actually met, are quite dismissive and he makes almost no mention of his own childhood. It is possible that the phenomenon of publicly acknowledging the importance of childhood, which had never until the late eighteenth century been manifested, may have been a result of the likelihood of losing children, though the odds were steadily diminishing: ‘For example, the London Quakers kept careful track of infant mortality rates, and while the years 1725–1749 saw 341 deaths in infancy for every thousand births, by the same period a century later this number had fallen to 151.’² Before this time it must have been an emotional risk for parents to bond deeply with a child, or to spare much thought to continuity of life when the links seemed so fragile and loss so complete. Relief at having simply survived childhood must have been a common feeling.

If John Keats was born 29 October 1795 in a coaching inn, the Swan and Hoop at 24 The Pavement, Moorgate, this would establish his credentials

as a kind of 'working-class hero', the lowest born of the group later to be derisively called Cockney Poets. No doubt this was the impression the radical Leigh Hunt wished to convey of his younger friend, saying that Keats's origin was 'of the humblest description ... He never spoke of it', though the latter phrase seems motivated by a psychological reticence about Keats's early experiences rather than expression of any embarrassment over class origins. Unfortunately, most of these details are far from certain. For example, the date of the baptismal entry for Keats is 31 October, but he and his family seem to have accepted the 29th as the day of his birth. His friend Charles Brown was to mention Keats's reluctance in adulthood to celebrate his birthday so the lack of clarity persisted. Nor is it clear that his parents were less than middle class, or even whether they were living at the inn at the time. His father, Thomas Keats, at some stage became the head ostler and the 'principal servant at the Swan and Hoop stables' (CCC, 121) and his mother, Frances Jennings, was the daughter of the relatively affluent proprietor of the inn, which seems to have been a successful business. They married on 9 October 1794 at St George's, Hanover Square, apparently in some haste since there were no family witnesses and the groom was only 21, the bride 19. We know nothing for sure of Thomas's family background – he was rumoured to be from the west country and two later confidants of Keats, Brown and Dilke, said he was from Devonshire – or of his economic circumstances, although the account which seems plausible is that when they met he was working as an ostler at the inn and that marriage to the daughter of the inn's proprietor improved his station. Frances's father, John Jennings, was a man of influence and some wealth. Master of the Innholders Company and a senior churchwarden, he had purchased the leasehold of the Swan and Hoop in 1774 and its neighbouring property in 1785, rather than letting the lease run out and having to move. Keats's mother's side of the family was, then, modestly wealthy, and Charles Cowden Clarke recalling this, admittedly seventy years later, placed the family among 'the upper rank of the middle class'. We simply do not know where the young couple began their married life, and it may not have been at the Swan and Hoop at all. Where they lived before 1798 is not known but we do know at least that the family, after living since Christmas 1798 on Craven Street, off the City Road, did indeed move to the inn in December 1802, where Mr Jennings at this time appointed Keats's father as head ostler, manager of the stables. This was an event which must have been interpreted optimistically by the family as evidence they were destined for financial and emotional stability.

Oddly enough, if we assume John's birth date was 29 October, the one thing we can be certain about is the weather in London on that day. According to the *Meteorological Journal Kept at the Apartments of the Royal Society by Order of the President and Council*, the day in London was fair with a south-south-westerly wind blowing and at seven in the morning the

temperature was a cool 48 degrees Fahrenheit outside (rising to 54 at two in the afternoon) and a barely comfortable 60 degrees inside (rising only to 62 in the afternoon).³ The previous day had been cloudy and fair but with 'much wind last night' – enough to be remarked upon in the official weather report. Cloud set in for a few autumn days and there was some rain on 31 October, the date of birth entered in the baptismal entry. John was baptised at St Botolph without Bishopsgate on 18 December 1795, another 'fair' day without rain, with a maximum temperature of 61, in a period of unusually clement weather for days so close to Christmas.

The political and social climate, however, was not so settled and 1795 was a tumultuous year in which the British government spied upon and prosecuted men perceived as radicals and dissidents plotting for the kind of republic instituted in 1789 in France.⁴ *The Times* which appeared on Thursday 31 October gives a snapshot of the nation's preoccupations. An editorial laments the dispersal by heavy gales of a fleet bound for the West Indies under Rear Admiral Fletcher Christian (who had in 1787 gained fame as the master's mate in the mutiny on the *Bounty*), and although the ships were reported safe they were now at risk of marauding French vessels. The revolutionary, republican government instated in Paris in 1789 after the French Revolution, had declared war on Britain in 1793, and signs of hostility and fear recur in many of the news items. For the next twenty years or so England was to be on an alert war footing, and in his adult years Keats was to lament the obtrusive presence of 'the military' and its garrisons wherever he went, from the Isle of Wight in the south to the Lake District in the north. The prosecution of several men in Dublin for high treason under the controversial law which had just been passed into legislation, criminalising 'encompassing and imagining the King's death' is reported, and they are accused of 'deliberating and contriving to overturn the King's Government ... conspiring to aid and assist the French at open and public war, in case they should land for the invasion of the country'. The increasingly paranoid Tory government under its Prime Minister Pitt had suspended in 1794 (and was to do so again in 1798), habeas corpus, a time-honoured legal action accepted as a bastion of the English law which protected the individual from prosecution without an allegation and proof. At the same time, and reported more benignly, Britain's maritime supremacy is reflected in notices of ships leaving for various fledgling colonies in the expanding British Empire. The King himself is 'with infinite satisfaction' reported to have 'never appeared in better health, nor in higher spirits, which very agreeably disappointed many of his friends, who did not expect to see him so well'. 'Never was his Majesty observed to be in more perfect recollection of himself than yesterday', writes the official reporter who is clearly intent on countering the increasingly public rumours that George III was insane. A serious problem confronting the nation was a shortage of wheat, leading to plans and pleas to cut down the consumption of bread

and pastries in the nation; while the most common ailment, the subject of many advertisements for medicines such as Cundell's Balsam of Honey, Dr James's Powder, Doctor Solander's Tea and Greenough's Tinctures (all made subject to stamp duty under a new law), was infection of the lungs evidenced in coughs, asthma and consumption – ominous for the Keats family in particular. Doctor Douglas, a self-professed specialist in treating venereal disease, proclaims his skills to potential patients who can expect to be examined 'with the utmost secrecy'. Meanwhile, the Theatre Royal at Drury Lane was playing *First Love* and that at Covent Garden Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*. At the same time, a long and lugubrious letter in the newspaper warns innocent lads coming to the alleys and winding streets of London for work, against the temptations of the play-house, 'a rendezvous of intrigue and intemperance, where he soon acquires an intimacy with the idle, the profligate, the gambler, and the prostitute, who eye him as their lawful prey', leading him 'from one crime to another'. The sad example is given of one 'young spark' who 'smoaks, swears, and carouses', leaving himself prey to more vicious habits. Such was the London and England John Keats was born into.

Peering back towards the childhood of people, especially in days before photographs and copious public records, is as uncertain as gazing into a crystal ball to divine their futures. We know that the Keats household was undeniably urban London bred, Cockney according to the official definition of that word (a person born within sound of Bow Bells, the bells of St Mary-le-Bow in Cheapside), and that John as eldest child must have been increasingly surrounded by siblings. George was born on 28 February 1797, Thomas on 28 November 1799, and Edward on 28 April 1801. George, Tom and Edward were baptised at St Leonard, Shoreditch, on 24 September 1801, but Edward died before the end of the following year and was buried in Bunhill Fields on 9 December 1802. Keats's sister Fanny, presumably named after her mother, was born on 3 June 1803 and baptised at St Botolph's. John's schooling began at a 'dame school', as was customary in the days before universal state education. Charles Cowden Clarke recalled that he physically resembled his father, 'short of stature and well-knit in person ... with brown hair and dark hazel eyes' although with his mother's 'wide' mouth, while his brothers looked more like their mother, 'tall, of good figure, with large, oval face, sombre features, and grave in behaviour' (CCC, *passim*). Others said John's hair was reddish or 'auburn'. Despite his mother's aspiration for him to go on to Harrow, in August 1803 when he was 7, John, followed by his brothers, went as a boarder to Clarke's School in Enfield, which Frances's brothers had attended in the 1780s, and to which we shall shortly return. But less than a year later another tragedy struck the family, with far-reaching consequences that were to haunt Keats, both psychologically in ways he never reveals, and more conspicuously financially, throughout his life.

At 1 a.m. on 15 April 1804, according to the coroner's inquest, a watchman who saw a riderless horse galloping past, traced back along the City Road and found on the road the unconscious body of Thomas Keats, bleeding from a deep wound in the right side of his head. The watchman dragged the body to the nearest surgeon and they took him back to the Swan and Hoop, but on that morning the father of 8-year-old John Keats, barely 30 himself, was dead. The nocturnal ride was occasioned by a visit to see his sons at boarding school, but no explanation has been found to account for the accident to a professional ostler and expert horseman on his 'remarkably fine horse'. Thomas was buried in the Jennings family vault on 23 April. Then something astonishing happened. Keats's mother, Frances, simply disappeared from the records, perhaps with the 11-month-old baby, Fanny. A person called Elizabeth Keats, presumably Thomas's sister, seems to have stepped in to care for the children at the stables to the inn. She stepped out again when Frances returned to her four young children, and with her late husband's small inheritance took a short lease on the stables of the Swan and Hoop. Then, only a little more than two months after her husband's death and in a position of financial precariousness, she remarried a man called William Rawlings, apparently a minor bank clerk about whom nothing is known. Since we know nothing of the circumstances we should be wary of devising theories about Keats feeling deserted by his mother, but these events must have influenced his adult attitudes towards women.

Soon after this, John Jennings died, leaving confusion over his inheritance since, although clearly a generous man, he was also (perhaps as a consequence of his magnanimity) somewhat unworldly about money affairs. The extraordinarily tangled financial history of the Keats and Jennings families is traced with scrupulous care by Robert Gittings in his book-length study *The Keats Inheritance*, showing how family members were turned into hostile antagonists during Keats's boyhood.⁵ Andrew Motion's brutally concise summary of Jennings's unintended, divisive legacy is probably the clearest on offer:

He had been in poor health since his retirement, receiving regular visits from the local doctor, Thomas Hammond, and on 1 February 1805 he made a hasty will. His total savings amounted to £13,000. He left half to his wife, a third to his son Midgley, and annuities of £50 to his daughter and sister. His grandchildren were bequeathed £1,000 to be divided among them equally.⁶

The money to the grandchildren could not yet be paid because they were all minors. The figure in theory left to them was to swell substantially after their grandmother's death. These were not insignificant amounts, and to give some indication, £1,000 in 1800 would have the purchasing power of about £50,000 today. To anticipate (and to cut short a very convoluted

story), John Keats always seemed to act on the reasonable assumption that eventually, on turning 21, he would be financially comfortable and even quite wealthy by the standards of his society, but in the meantime the reality was very different and more tangled. In the short run, after her father's death, Keats's mother Frances initiated acrimonious lawsuits over the will, accusing of duplicity both her own mother and brother Midgley, who soon after died of tuberculosis leaving the picture even more complicated. Others challenged the will over a period of years, not surprisingly since it was vague and involved a substantial amount of money. The domestic situation grew worse. Frances's gamble did not pay off. After lengthy legal proceedings she was left even worse off, with only an annuity of £50 and a portion eventually paid from Thomas Keats's intestate legacy of £2,000. The rest was left to her children in trust until the majority of each, though they never knew of this until after John died since it was known to nobody except their mother's lawyer who died during the interim period. Most of her available money was eaten up by debts attaching to the inn. In May 1805, Frances's mother, Alice Jennings, took over guardianship of the four children. We know she disapproved not only of her daughter's first marriage to Thomas Keats but also her swift remarriage to Rawlings, but we do not know whether she actively took control or whether Frances, realising her limitations, willingly put the children into her care. Admittedly, by the end of 1805 John, Tom and George were all at boarding school and Fanny may have stayed with her mother, so Alice's tasks could not have been especially onerous. In the middle of 1806, Frances was to separate from Rawlings and for the next three years she again effectively disappeared, according to Abbey to live with a Jew called Abraham, though Abbey's dislike of her makes this story untrustworthy. Once again the children went to their 69-year-old grandmother, now living in Ponders End, Edmonton, which is near Enfield.

Whatever happened in the sequence as a whole, the distilled facts were that in a very short period, after losing a young brother, and when he had barely started school, John Keats had lost his father and in the following two months acquired a stepfather, twice been separated from his mother, and was embroiled in extreme family tensions that ended up with he and his brothers and sister living with their grandmother. Child psychologists may offer clues as to the emotional consequences, but the fact is that we have no evidence recorded by Keats himself concerning his mother, father or grandparents. Whether he avoided or repressed the subject, or whether he controlled and overcame his feelings which must have included extreme grief, anger and, as the eldest child, a sense of vicarious responsibility, we can never know. All his later 'philosophising' is motivated by a desire to understand how loss and adversity can be part of a maturing process lying at the heart of individuation and unique creativity. He may have rapidly acquired an advanced sense of responsibility towards his younger siblings. Robert Gittings suggests the whole experience helps to explain Keats's

later expression of mistrusting people's reliability, as he wrote 'I scarcely remember counting upon any Happiness ... I have suspected every Body' (JKL, 1, 186 and 292). *Hamlet* was to become one of his favourite plays of Shakespeare, and the similarities in personal circumstances cannot have escaped his recognition, not only because Rawlings so quickly supplanted his father in his mother's affection but also since that man was immediately given his father's job as manager of the stables, for which he was singularly unqualified and incompetent and which he eventually abandoned. The comparison between heroic father and despised surrogate must have seemed to the bewildered stepson like Hamlet's comparison, 'Hyperion to a satyr'.

It is often said that being sent to boarding school can be psychologically dislocating, but in Keats's case it surely sheltered him from the domestic upheavals after his father's death. He was with his brothers there and while alive his father was assiduous in visiting them regularly. Whether from innate aptitude or a desire to avoid problems, he was an extremely conscientious student, 'a most orderly scholar' according to Charles Cowden Clarke, and one who read so voraciously that he exhausted the school library. He started schoolwork before classes and 'occupied the hours during meals in reading. Thus his *whole* time was engrossed', even in recreation hours (CCC, 123). As a consequence, Keats won prizes for his work, receiving books which, although factual in basis – for example, John Bonnycastle's *Introduction to Astronomy* and books of voyages and travels – opened up his already impressionable intellectual horizons and imagination. He read many books on history and travel, including histories of France, Scotland and America by William Robertson, himself a political liberal and progressive thinker whose books Keats came back to later in his life. Gilbert Burnett's *History of his Own Time* was based on an insistence on religious tolerance and praised the Protestant heroes Milton and Algernon Sidney as great English republicans. Although Keats may not have gone far past Virgil's *Aeneid* in Latin, classical literature was favoured in his reading by Andrew Tooke's *Pantheon* and by Lemprière's *A Classical Dictionary*, which Keats virtually learned by heart. Clarke mentions Maria Edgeworth's novels but otherwise there was little weighting towards fiction or poetry in Keats's reading, or indeed imaginative literature in general. This interest he developed and shared with Clarke after his school days. But perhaps most significantly, the Clarke family were avid readers of the journal edited by Leigh Hunt, *The Examiner*, which they loaned to Keats, and through this he became aware not only of radical ideas which, in Clarke's opinion, 'no doubt laid the foundation of his love of civil and religious liberty', but also must have alerted him to the revolution in poetry heralded first by the controversies over Chatterton and the *Lyrical Ballads* by Wordsworth and Coleridge, first printed in 1798. He was to read it throughout his life.

One of the early and unfortunate effects of the traumatic losses sustained in his family may have been the exacerbation of a tendency towards

childhood violence, which runs through many of the memorial anecdotes of the young Keats, and even if individually unreliable they are recurrent. One which seems to have been indirectly reported from his brother Tom as an adult suggests that John was 'violent and ungovernable' as a child while another, reported much later by Haydon but perhaps on Keats's information, was that he once held his mother prisoner in the house 'with a naked sword'. If this actually happened, we do not know whether it was before or after his father died, and if it was his own recollection then it must be admitted that a child's viewpoint may have exaggerated an innocent prank into an unreliable memory. Other such stories persist and in particular are confirmed by his teacher and later friend Charles Cowden Clarke who said the boy reminded him of the actor Edmund Kean whom Keats later admired. Some stories suggest that he fought either against bullies or to protect those weaker than himself, and even when he was much older he admires the 'energy' involved in fighting. Keats was interested in boxing, as Cowden Clarke reports: 'Keats also attended a prize fight between the two most skilful "light weights" of the day, Randal and Turner; and in describing the rapidity of the blows of the one, while the other was falling, he tapped his fingers on the window-pane' (CCC, 145). Prizefighting in its heyday at just this time, between 1800 and 1824, commanded considerable interest as 'the English sport', appealing to many contemporary writers such as Hazlitt, whose essay 'The Fight' appeared in 1822, Reynolds, Byron, Lamb, Cobbett and John Clare. Along with Hazlitt, Tom Moore and Reynolds, Keats was as an adult to dine with Pierce Egan, 'author of the four volume definitive edition of *Boxiana* the history of Regency prizefighting'.⁷ Pugilism in the form of boxing and wrestling did not arouse the same liberal squeamishness as it does today, and it even carried an association of proud nationalism.

As a boy Keats was certainly far from effete or timid. We cannot entirely discount the significance of the fact that he must have been short as a child, as he certainly was in adulthood, and may have been a target for bullying or provoked to prove himself in a world of boys growing up at that time. But Cowden Clarke, who knew him better than most, although admitting that Keats's 'passion at times was almost ungovernable' also adds a comic image of 'wisp-of-straw conflagration[s]', given his small stature and affectionate nature. Clarke reports his 'terrier courage; but his high-mindedness, his utter unconsciousness of a mean motive'. Even the headmaster noticed Keats's sudden and unexpected 'moods'. Obviously we should remain non-judgmental about his reputation as a fighter, and besides, if we were to replace the word 'violent' with 'spirited', 'rebellious' or 'self-willed', then we can infer a family likeness in temperament to what we hear of his mother's. While his father was described as simply 'a man of good sense and very much liked', John's mother acquired a reputation for 'saturnine' appearance, lively independence and vivacity, and she does not seem to have been