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John Keats: A New Life
(Yale University Press, 2012)
by Nicholas Roe

As NICHOLAS ROE MAKES CLEAR in his Acknowledgements, John Keats has always been well-served by sympathetic biographers and critics, from Leigh Hunt to Andrew Motion, Charles Cowden Clarke to Walter Jackson Bate. The extant records of the poet's short life are, relatively speaking, ample. "We know a great deal about much of his life", Roe writes, "sometimes with day-to-day and even hour-by-hour precision" (xvii). Do we need another life of Keats, then? What, to use its subtitle, is so "new" about Roe's biography? In answer to both questions in turn: yes, and a great deal. After all, for all of its fullness, Keats's records leave "significant gaps and puzzles that limit our understanding and appreciation of his achievement" (ibid.). By necessity biographers will always have to speculate about sizeable parts of the subject's life. Even the circumstances of Keats's birth in the winter of 1795 remain unclear (31 October is still the best guess). In particular, we have lacked fundamental materials with which to reconstruct how and where Keats lived as a child. And crucial details about even his immediate family have always eluded scholars. Leigh Hunt famously said Keats was a seven months' child; such a view, however truthful, has long typified the mythical, almost heroic proportions of Keats's story.

Benefiting from new archival research and assured detective work, however, this book begins with a compelling account of Keats's family, and greatly expands our understanding of the turbulent environment that shaped the aspiring poet's childhood and early manhood. Roe convincingly shows that, throughout his short existence, Keats's ambitions were relentlessly chastened by a series of unfortunate circumstances above and beyond the most widely documented examples, such as dwindling family wealth, deaths, horrific hospital scenes, hostile reviews of his work, a hopeless courtship of Fanny Brawne, chronic ill health, and snubs from fellow poets. Roe, rightly, makes much of an inheritance Keats and his kin never received. Certainly, the fraught financial situation lay at the centre of, and epitomised, the uneasy familial context in which Keats was raised. As Roe writes, "The rift between the Keats and Jennings families would never be repaired, and as late as the 1880s Fanny Keats, aged eighty-three, was still trying to discover what had happened to their money in Chancery" (29). As part of its fuller treatment of Keats's early years, this new biography also brings new poignancy to Keats's relationship with his parents, a topic much speculated on but little understood until now. Thomas Keates, the father, remains a mysterious figure. But we do get a glimpse into his courtship of the poet's mother Frances Jennings. Thomas and

Frances seemed to have married in haste and perhaps without parental consent. For a time they supported themselves with what seems to have been a flourishing livery stables, but Thomas died in mysterious circumstances in 1804 when, although a seasoned rider, he fell from his horse and smashed his skull. The inquest ruled the death an accident, but whispers of foul play never died out. A twenty-nine-year-old widow with four children to care for, and a spiralling addiction to alcohol to support, Frances found a new family. Keats felt abandoned by his mother, and this, as Roe writes, "left him primed with insecurities" (25). The fraught relationship with an absentee mother permits a dramatic rereading of *The Eve of St Agnes*, here taken as a scene of maternal trauma replayed.

The opening chapters of the book, in which Roe addresses the early years up to 1814, move at a rapid speed and so vividly propel us into the world in which John Keats was born. This is not to suggest that details are scant. On the contrary, one of the more important achievements of this biography is the exemplary way in which the author deploys his material, holding back fuller information until it makes more sense, and yields more critical impact, rather than adhering to a strictly linear teleology. (Aspiring biographers would do well to follow this example in particular.) Throughout the book Roe returns to the difficult circumstances of the subject's early years in a number of thought-provoking readings of the poems Keats later wrote. Another notable achievement here is the way in which Roe's biography shows that Keats's life, for better or worse, was affected by the many people who entered it. Across the pages traipse various prominent men and women, many of whom exerted a huge influence over the young writer, including the familiar figures of Cowden Clarke and Hunt. No less important, we find, are the largely unknown, or otherwise liminal, figures to whom Roe refers. It's also illuminating to think of the near-misses or unfulfilled acquaintanceships that might have altered Keats's life and works in unfathomable ways. After all, Keats flitted between social groups, even between places. Roe puts it well: "Raised between the City and rural Middlesex, as a child Keats always lived on an edge. Never fixed, always in flux, that suburban threshold has many counterparts in Keats's poetic topography of borders and prospects" (13). In the popular imagination much has been made of Keats's ill-fated pursuit of Fanny Brawne, moreover. Introduced in the final quarter of this book, though, the relationship is given little more attention than Keats's affairs with two other women: Isabella Jones and Jane Cox. Brought together at Hastings in May 1817, Keats and Isabella attracted each other and within days he "warmed with her… and kissed her" (qtd. 170). The phrasing, as Roe notes, is highly suggestive. Scholars will certainly need to reread Keats's love poetry in light of such evidence and even re-evaluate the received opinion of the poet as a failed lover.

Traditional stalwarts of Keats biographies retain their rightful prominence. Charles Cowden Clarke, in particular, has long been considered a decisive

influence on the aspiring young writer. Here Roe offers a detailed treatment of Cowden Clarke's role in expanding Keats's reading knowledge of the great poets. Indeed, the London childhood and school years are brought to life more completely than ever before, as is Keats's important friendship with the charismatic Leigh Hunt. Wordsworth, by contrast, evidently held ambivalent views of Keats. The elder poet's terse claim that *Endymion* was "a Very pretty piece of Paganism" is the stuff of legend. In this new biography, though, Roe suggests that Keats may have taken Wordsworth's words as a compliment. Certainly readers have long detected a compelling energy, even a swagger, in the poem, almost as if it marks the public outing of Keats's confidence in his abilities. In the charming lines of 'I stood tip-toe' Keats versifies a catalogue of observations fondly recalled from his boyish ventures at Enfield and Edmonton. There is a danger, of course, of tracing Keats too readily in his own works: to take the nightingale, the explorers, the pastoral figures and the like as self-idealisations, and the monsters and demons as negative projections of others. Roe himself seems wearied by "frankly autobiographical verses" (119) but, instead, he grounds his readings in a variety of salient approaches, such as book history. An instructive example comes in chapter ten, where he scrutinises Charles Richards's printing of *Poems, by John Keats*, which, through a common connection with Shakespeare, positioned Keats with the liberal publication *The Examiner*. Throughout the biography more broadly, Roe frequently draws attention to Keats's engagement with the highly active periodical press of the 1810s. Indeed, one of the great joys of reading this new biography is its continued attempt to show Keats at work on his long poems, and the ways it weaves in adept discussions of the sorts of materials and stimuli that would have been in the poet's purview. The well-worn favourites receive their fair share of attention, especially the great Odes of 1819, which are usefully read alongside contemporaneous productions. 'To Autumn', he writes, "can be enjoyed as one of the supreme lyrical poems in English, and celebrated as a more subtle response to Manchester's Peterloo Massacre than Shelley's *Masque of Anarchy*" (xvi). A telling contrast might be drawn here with one of Keats's most influential biographers and critics, Walter Jackson Bate, who famously praised 'To Autumn' as "the most nearly perfect poem in English" precisely because its poet was "completely absent" (qtd. xvi). Roe takes pains, in short, to place Keats firmly in his intellectual environment. Far from being mere daydreams, his poetic fantasies take root in the gritty realities of the nineteenth century. Above all else, the reader cannot help but feel the "sheer physicality" of Keats's engagement with poetry, in Roe's terms (xix). Rather than mask the realities around him, the sights and smells he met, noxious or otherwise, ferment in his verse. This is a manly, robust Keats: a young man who, with his friend Charles Brown, covered 600-odd miles in forty-three days while on tour of Scotland: "Who was John Keats? The sturdy twenty-two-year-old, who strode six hundred miles around Scotland? Or a 'sickly boy of pretty

abilities' who had missed his path in the world?" (xv).

On the subject of health Roe offers a contentious account of Keats's use of mercury. Once widely prescribed for venereal disease, by 1817 mercury had become a less obvious treatment in light of the rise of less painful medicines. But did Keats take his "little mercury" to alleviate a minor case of gonorrhoea, as biographers have always assumed? As Roe astutely observes, Keats continued to self-administer mercury throughout the following winter and spring when he set off on his walking tour of Scotland in summer 1818, long after his supposed gonorrhoea would have cleared up. When Keats returned to London, a chronic sore throat, niggling toothache, and other complaints had ravaged his body. Vulnerable and increasingly fretful, he was confined for three stressful months with his dying brother, during which time he contracted the tuberculosis that killed him in his manly twenties. Mercury, in this account, hastened Keats's physical and mental decline. If we follow Roe's reading of 'Ode to a Nightingale' as "one of the greatest re-creations of a drug-inspired dream-vision in English literature", the result of the needlessly prolonged use of mercury, then the speaker's claim to be "half in love with easeful death", the relentless palpitations of a heart that aches, a desperate clamouring for "full-throated ease", among other things, take on a ghoulish new significance (324).

Few readers can come away from Keats's poetry and letters without developing a strong personal attachment to the author. For some he is a supreme craftsman. For others he is a political dreamer. Roe's Keats is an aspiring poet, a man of the world, and, above all else, a troubled human being. And he seems all the more real for it, his works all the more astonishing. Eminently readable and lively, and beautifully presented with many familiar and new illustrations, Roe's biography retells the story of the young Romantic snuffed out at the age of 25 in a wholly new and inventive manner. *John Keats: A New Life* brings to light an astonishing depth of archival materials, over which the author keeps a masterful control. The narrative he weaves throughout the book is instructive rather than impulsive. And new veins of research have been expertly opened up.