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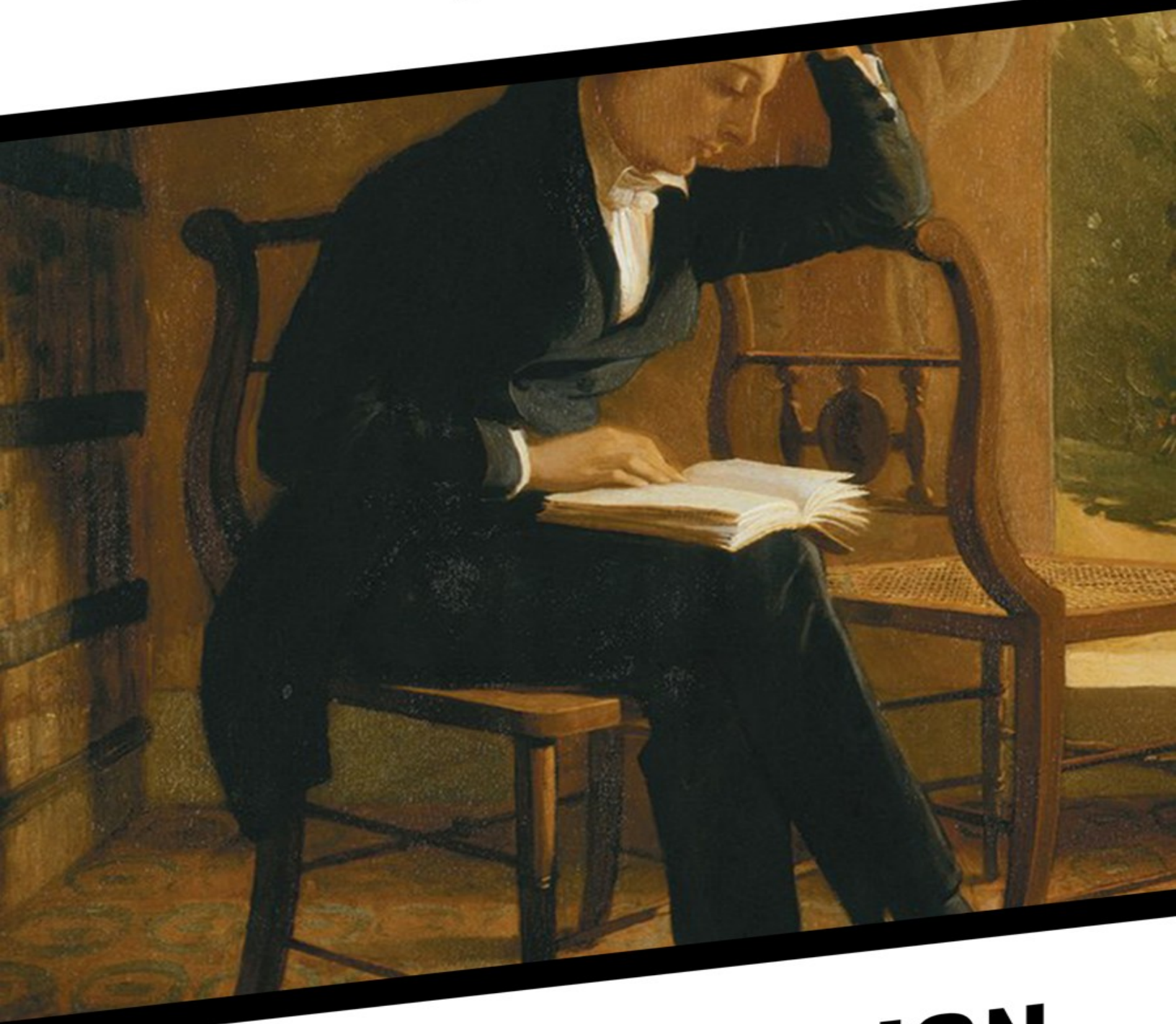
JOHN KEATS



HYPERION

John Keats

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Life of John Keats by Sidney Colvin

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Preface

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To the name and work of Keats our best critics and scholars have in recent years paid ever closer attention and warmer homage. But their studies have for the most part been specialized and scattered, and there does not yet exist any one book giving a full and connected account of his life and poetry together in the light of our present knowledge and with help of all the available material. Ever since it was my part, some thirty years ago, to contribute the volume on Keats to the series of short studies edited by Lord Morley, (the *English Men of Letters* series), I have hoped one day to return to the subject and do my best to supply this want. Once released from official duties, I began to prepare for the task, and through the last soul-shaking years, being over age for any effectual war-service, have found solace and occupation in carrying it through.

The following pages, timed to appear in the hundredth year after the publication of Keats' first volume, are the result. I have sought in them to combine two aims not always easy to be reconciled, those of holding the interest of the general reader and at the same time of satisfying, and perhaps on some points even informing, the special student. I have tried to set forth consecutively and fully the history of a life outwardly remarkable for nothing but its tragic brevity, but inwardly as crowded with imaginative and emotional experience as any on record, and moreover, owing to the openheartedness of the man and to the preservation and unreserved publication of his letters, lying bare almost more than any other to our knowledge. Further, considering for how much friendship counted in Keats' life, I have tried to call up the group of his friends about him in

their human lineaments and relations, so far as these can be recovered, more fully than has been attempted before. I believe also that I have been able to trace more closely than has yet been done some of the chief sources, both in literature and in works of art, of his inspiration. I have endeavoured at the same time to make felt the critical and poetical atmosphere, with its various and strongly conflicting currents, amid which he lived, and to show how his genius, almost ignored in its own day beyond the circle of his private friends, was a focus in which many vital streams of poetic tendency from the past centred and from which many radiated into the future. To illustrate this last point it has been necessary, by way of epilogue, to sketch, however briefly, the story of his posthumous fame, his after life in the minds and hearts of English writers and readers until to-day. By English I mean all those whose mother language is English. To follow the extension of Keats' fame to the Continent is outside my aim. He has not yet, by means of translation and comment in foreign languages, become in any full sense a world-poet. But during the last thirty years the process has begun, and there would be a good deal to say, did my scheme admit it, of work upon Keats done abroad, especially in France, where our literature has during the last generation been studied with such admirable intelligence and care.

In an attempt of this scope, I have necessarily had to repeat matters of common knowledge and to say again things that others have said well and sufficiently already. But working from materials hitherto in part untouched, and taking notice of such new lights as have appeared while my task was in progress, I have drawn from them some conclusions, both biographical and critical, which I believe to be my own and which I hope may stand. I have not shrunk from quoting in full poems and portions of poems which everybody knows, in cases where I wanted the reader to have their text not merely in memory but actually before

him, for re-studying with a fresh comment or in some new connexion. I have also quoted very largely from the poet's letters, even now not nearly as much read as things so full of genius should be, both in order that some of his story may be told in his own words and for the sake of that part of his mind — a great and most interesting part — which is expressed in them but has not found its way into his poems. It must be added that when I found things in my former small book which I did not see my way to better and which seemed to fit into the expanded scale of this one, I have not hesitated sometimes to incorporate them — to the amount perhaps of forty or fifty pages in all.

I wish I could hope that my work will be found such as to justify the amount and variety of friendly help I have had in its preparation. Thanks for such help are due in more quarters than I can well call to mind. First and foremost, to Lord Crewe for letting me have free and constant access to his unrivalled collection of original documents connected with the subject, both those inherited from his father (referred to in the notes as 'Houghton MSS.') and those acquired in recent years by himself (referred to as 'Crewe MSS.'). Speaking generally, it may be assumed that new matter for which no authority is quoted is taken from these sources. To Miss Henrietta Woodhouse of Weston Lea, Albury, I am indebted for valuable documentary and other information concerning her uncle Richard Woodhouse. Next in importance among collections of Keats documents to that of Lord Crewe is that of Mr J. P. Morgan in New York, the chief contents of which have by his leave been transcribed for me with the kindliest diligence by his librarian Miss Greene. For other illustrative documents existing in America, I believe of value, I should like to be able to thank their owners, Mr Day and Mr Louis Holman of Boston: but these gentlemen made a condition of their help the issue of a limited edition *de luxe* of the book specially illustrated from their material, a

condition the publishers judged it impossible to carry out, at any rate in war-time.

Foremost among my scholarly helpers at home has been my friend Professor W. P. Ker. For information and suggestions in answer to enquiries of one kind or another I am indebted to Professor Israel Gollancz and Mr Henry Bradley; to Professor Ernest Weekley, the best living authority on surnames; to Mr A. H. Bullen; to Mr Falconer Madan and Mr J. W. Mackail; to Mr Thomas J. Wise; to Mr H. C. Shelley; to Mr J. D. Milner, Director of the National Portrait Gallery; and to my former colleague Mr A. H. Smith, Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum. Mr George Whale supplied me with full copies of and comments on the entries concerning Keats in the books of Guy's Hospital. Dr Hambley Rowe of Bradford put at my disposal the results, unfortunately not yet conclusive, of the researches made by him as a zealous Cornishman on Keats' possible Cornish descent. I must not omit thanks to Mr Emery Walker for his skill and pains in preparing the illustrations for my book. With reference to these, I may note that the head from the portrait painted by Severn in 1859 and now in Lord Crewe's possession was chosen for colour reproduction as frontispiece because it is the fullest in colouring and, though done from memory so long after the poet's death, to my mind the most satisfying and convincing in general air of any of the extant portraits. Of the miniature done by Severn from life in 1818, copied and recopied by himself, Charles Brown and others, and made familiar by numberless reproductions in black and white, the original, now deposited by the Dilke Trustees in the National Portrait Gallery, has the character of a monochrome touched with sharp notes or suggestions of colour in the hair, lips, hands, book, *etc.* I have preferred not to repeat either this or the equally well known — nay, hackneyed — and very distressing deathbed drawing made by Severn at Rome. The profile from Haydon's life-mask of the poet is

taken, not, like most versions of the same mask, from the plaster, but from an electrotype made many years ago when the cast was fresh and showing the structure and modellings of the head more subtly, in my judgment, than the original cast itself in its present state. Both cast and electrotype are in the National Portrait Gallery. So is the oil-painting of Keats seated reading, begun by Severn soon after the poet’s death and finished apparently two years later, which I have reproduced, well known though it is, partly for its appositeness to a phrase in one of his letters to his sister. Besides the portraits of Keats, I have added from characteristic sources those of the two men who most influenced him at the outset of his career, Leigh Hunt and Haydon. A new feature in my book is provided by the reproductions of certain works of art, both pictures and antiques, which can be proved or surmised to have struck and stimulated his imagination. The reproductions of autographs, one of his own and one of Haydon’s, speak for themselves.

Chapter I

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1795-1815: BIRTH AND PARENTAGE: SCHOOLDAYS AND APPRENTICESHIP

For all the study and research, that have lately been spent on the life and work of Keats, there is one point as to which we remain as much in the dark as ever, and that is his family history. He was born at an hour when the gradually re-awakened genius of poetry in our race, I mean of impassioned and imaginative poetry, was ready to offer new forms of spiritual sustenance, and a range of emotions both widened and deepened, to a generation as yet only half prepared to receive them. If we consider the other chief poets who bore their part in that great revival, we can commonly recognize either some strain of power in their blood or some strong inspiring quality in the scenery and traditions of their home, or both together. Granting that the scenic and legendary romance of the Scottish border wilds were to be made live anew for the delight of the latter-day world, we seem to see in Walter Scott a man predestined for the task alike by origin, association, and opportunity. Had the indwelling spirit of the Cumbrian lakes and mountains, and their power upon the souls and lives of those living among them, to be newly revealed and interpreted to the general mind of man, where should we look for its spokesman but in one of Wordsworth’s birth and training? What, then, it may be asked, of Byron and Shelley, the two great contrasted poets of revolution, or rather of revolt against the counter-revolution, in the younger generation, — the one worldly, mocking, half theatrically rebellious and

Satanic, the other unworldly even to unearthliness, a loving alien among men, more than half truly angelic? These we are perhaps rightly used to count as offspring of their age, with its forces and ferments, its violent actions and reactions, rather than of their ancestry or upbringing. And yet, if we will, we may fancy Byron inspired in literature by demons of the same froward brood that had urged others of his lineage on lives of adventure or of crime, and may conceive that Shelley drew some of his instincts for headlong, peremptory self-guidance, though in directions most opposite to the traditional, from the stubborn and wayward stock of colonial and county aristocracy whence he sprang.

Keats, more purely and exclusively a poet than any of these, and responding more intuitively than any to the spell alike of ancient Greece, of mediæval romance, and of the English woods and fields, was born in a dull and middling walk of London city life, and ‘if by traduction came his mind’, — to quote Dryden with a difference, — it was through channels hidden from our search. From his case less even than from Shakespeare’s can we draw any argument as to the influence of heredity or environment on the birth and growth of genius. His origin, in spite of much diligent inquiry, has not been traced beyond one generation on the father’s side and two on the mother’s. His father, Thomas Keats, was a west-country lad who came young to London, and while still under twenty held the place of head ostler in a livery-stable kept by a Mr John Jennings in Finsbury. Seven or eight years later, about the beginning of 1795, he married his employer’s daughter, Frances Jennings, then in her twentieth year. Mr Jennings, who had carried on a large business in north-eastern London and the neighbouring suburbs, and was a man of substance, retired about the same time to live in the country, at Ponder’s End near Edmonton, leaving the management of the business in the hands of his son-in-law. At first the young couple lived at the

stable, at the sign of the Swan and Hoop, Finsbury Pavement, facing the then open space of Lower Moorfields. Here their eldest child, the poet John Keats, was born prematurely on either the 29th or 31st of October, 1795. A second son, named George, followed on February 28, 1797; a third, Tom, on November 18, 1799; a fourth, Edward, who died in infancy, on April 28, 1801; and on the 3rd of June, 1803, a daughter, Frances Mary. In the meantime the family had moved from the stable to a house in Craven Street, City Road, half a mile farther north.

The Keats brothers as they grew up were remarked for their intense fraternal feeling and strong vein of family pride. But it was a pride that looked forward and not back: they were bent on raising the family name and credit, but seem to have taken no interest at all in its history, and have left no record or tradition concerning their forbears. Some of their friends believed their father to have been a Devonshire man: their sister, who long survived them, said she remembered hearing as a child that he came from Cornwall, near the Land’s End.

There is no positive evidence enabling us to decide the question. The derivation of English surnames is apt to be complicated and obscure, and ‘Keats’ is no exception to the rule. It is a name widely distributed in various counties of England, though not very frequent in any. It may in some cases be a possessive form derived from the female Christian name Kate, on the analogy of Jeans from Jane, or Maggs from Margaret: but the source accepted as generally probable for it and its several variants is the Middle-English adjective ‘kete’, a word of Scandinavian origin meaning bold, gallant. In the form ‘Keyte’ the name prevails principally in Warwickshire: in the variants Keat (or Keate) and Keats (or Keates) it occurs in many of the midland, home, and southern, especially the south-western, counties.

Mr Thomas Hardy tells me of a Keats family sprung from a horsedealer of Broadmayne, Dorsetshire, members of

which lived within his own memory as farmers and publicans in and near Dorchester, one or two of them bearing, as he thought, a striking likeness to the portrait of the poet. One Keats family of good standing was established by the mid-eighteenth century in Devon, in the person of a well-known headmaster of Blundell's school, Tiverton, afterwards rector of Bideford. His son was one of Nelson's bravest and most famous captains, Sir Richard Godwin Keats of the 'Superb', and from the same stock sprang in our own day the lady whose tales of tragic and comic west-country life, published under the pseudonym 'Zack', gave promise of a literary career which has been unhappily cut short. But with this Bideford stock the Keats brothers can have claimed no connexion, or as schoolboys they would assuredly have made the prowess of their namesake of the 'Superb' their pride and boast, whereas in fact their ideal naval hero was a much less famous person, their mother's brother Midgley John Jennings, a tall lieutenant of marines who served with some credit on Duncan's flagship at Camperdown and by reason of his stature was said to have been a special mark for the enemy's musketry. In the form Keat or Keate the name is common enough both in Devon, particularly near Tiverton, and in Cornwall, especially in the parishes of St Teath and Lanteglos, — that is round about Camelford, — and also as far eastward as Callington and westward as St Columb Major: the last named parish having been the seat of a family of the name entitled to bear arms and said to have come originally from Berkshire.

But neither the records of the Dorsetshire family, nor search in the parish registers of Devon and Cornwall, have as yet yielded the name of any Thomas Keat or Keats as born in 1768, the birth-year of our poet's father according to our information. A 'Thomas Keast', however, is registered as having been born in that year in the parish of St Agnes, between New Quay and Redruth. Now Keast is a purely Cornish name, limited to those parts, and it is quite possible

that, borne by a Cornishman coming to London, it would get changed into the far commoner Keats (a somewhat similar phonetic change is that of Crisp into Cripps). So the identification of this Thomas Keast of St Agnes as the father of our Keats is not to be excluded. The Jennings connexion is of itself a circumstance which may be held to add to the likelihood of a Cornish origin for the poet, Jennings being a name frequent in the Falmouth district and occurring as far westward as Lelant. Children are registered as born in and after 1770 of the marriage of a John Jennings to a Catherine Keate at Penryn; and it is a plausible conjecture (always remembering it to be a conjecture and no more) that the prosperous London stable-keeper Jonn Jennings was himself of Cornish origin, and that between him and the lad Thomas Keats, whom he took so young first as head stableman and then as son-in-law, there existed some previous family connexion or acquaintance. These, however, are matters purely conjectural, and all we really know about the poet's parents are the dates above mentioned, and the fact that they were certainly people somewhat out of the ordinary. Thomas Keats was noticed in his lifetime as a man of sense, spirit, and conduct: 'of so remarkably fine a commonsense and native respectability,' writes Cowden Clarke, in whose father's school the poet and his brother were brought up, 'that I perfectly remember the warm terms in which his demeanour used to be canvassed by my parents after he had been to visit his boys.' And again:— 'I have a clear recollection of his lively and energetic countenance, particularly when seated on his gig and preparing to drive his wife home after visiting his sons at school. In feature, stature, and manner John resembled his father.' Of Frances Keats, the poet's mother, we learn more vaguely that she was 'tall, of good figure, with large oval face, and sensible deportment': and again that she was a lively, clever, impulsive woman, passionately fond of amusement, and supposed to have hastened the birth of her eldest child by

some imprudence. Her second son, George, wrote in after life of her and of her family as follows:— ‘my grandfather Mr Jennings was very well off, as his will shows, and but that he was extremely generous and gullible would have been affluent. I have heard my grandmother speak with enthusiasm of his excellencies, and Mr Abbey used to say that he never saw a woman of the talents and sense of my grandmother, except my mother.’

As to the grandmother and her estimable qualities all accounts are agreed, but of the mother the witness quoted himself tells a very different tale. This Mr Richard Abbey was a wholesale tea-dealer in Saint Pancras Lane and a trusted friend of Mr and Mrs Jennings. In a memorandum written long after their death he declares that both as girl and woman their daughter, the poet’s mother, was a person of unbridled temperament, and that in her later years she fell into loose ways and was no credit to her family. Whatever truth there may be in these charges, it is certain that she lived to the end under her mother’s roof and was in no way cut off from her children. The eldest boy John in particular she is said to have held in passionate affection, by him passionately returned. Once as a young child, when she was ordered to be left quiet during an illness, he is said to have insisted on keeping watch at her door with an old sword, and allowing no one to go in. Haydon, an artist who loved to lay his colours thick, gives this anecdote of the sword a different turn:— ‘He was when an infant a most violent and ungovernable child. At five years of age or thereabouts, he once got hold of a naked sword and shutting the door swore nobody should go out. His mother wanted to do so, but he threatened her so furiously she began to cry, and was obliged to wait till somebody through the window saw her position and came to the rescue.’ Another trait of the poet’s childhood, mentioned also by Haydon, on the authority of a gammer who had known him from his birth, is that when he was first learning to speak, instead of answering sensibly,

he had a trick of making a rime to the last word people said and then laughing.

The parents were ambitious for their boys, and would have liked to send them to Harrow, but thinking this beyond their means, chose the school kept by a Mr John Clarke at Enfield. The brothers of Mrs Keats, including the boys' admired uncle, the lieutenant of marines, had been educated here, and the school was one of good repute, and of exceptionally pleasant aspect and surroundings. The schoolhouse had been originally built for a rich West India merchant, in the finest style of early Georgian classic architecture, and stood in a spacious garden at the lower end of the town. When years afterwards the site was used for a railway station, the old house was for some time allowed to stand: but later it was taken down, and the central part of the façade, with its fine proportions and rich ornaments in moulded brick, was transported to the South Kensington (now Victoria and Albert) Museum, and is still preserved there as a choice example of the style. It is evident that Mr Clarke was a kind and excellent schoolmaster, much above the standards of his time, and that lads with any bent for literature or scholarship had their full chance under him. Still more was this the case when his son Charles Cowden Clarke, a genial youth with an ardent and trained love of books and music, grew old enough to help him as usher in the school-work. The brothers John and George Keats were mere children when they were put under Mr Clarke's care, John not much over and George a good deal under eight years old, both still dressed, we are told, in the childish frilled suits which give such a grace to groups of young boys in the drawings of Stothard and his contemporaries.

Not long after Keats had been put to school he lost his father, whose horse fell and threw him in the City Road as he rode home late one night after dining at Southgate, perhaps on his way home from the Enfield School. His skull

was fractured: he was picked up unconscious about one o’clock and died at eight in the morning. This was on the 16th of April, 1804. Within twelve months his widow had taken a second husband — one William Rawlings, described as ‘of Moorgate in the city of London, stable-keeper,’ presumably therefore the successor of her first husband in the management of her father’s business. (It may be noted incidentally that Rawlings, like Jennings, is a name common in Cornwall, especially in and about the parish of Madron). This marriage must have turned out unhappily, for it was soon followed by a separation, under what circumstances or through whose fault we are not told. In the correspondence of the Keats brothers after they were grown up no mention is ever made of their stepfather, of whom the family seem soon to have lost all knowledge. Mrs Rawlings went with her children to live at Edmonton, in the house of her mother, Mrs Jennings, who was just about this time left a widow. The family was well enough provided for, Mr Jennings (who died March 8, 1805) having left a fortune of over £13,000, of which, in addition to other legacies, he bequeathed a capital yielding £200 a year to his widow absolutely; one yielding £50 a year to his daughter Frances Rawlings, with reversion to her Keats children after her death; and £1000 to be separately held in trust for the said children and divided among them on the coming of age of the youngest.

Between the home, then, in Church Street, Edmonton, and the neighbouring Enfield school, where the two elder brothers were in due time joined by the youngest, the next five years of Keats’ boyhood (1806-1811) were passed in sufficient comfort and pleasantness. He did not live to attain the years, or the success, of men who write their reminiscences; and almost the only recollections he has left of his own early days refer to holiday times in his grandmother’s house at Edmonton. They are conveyed in some rimes which he wrote years afterwards by way of foolishness to amuse his young sister, and testify to a

partiality, common also to little boys not of genius, for dabbling by the brookside and keeping small fishes in tubs, —

There was a naughty boy
Tittlebat
And a naughty boy was he
Not over fat,
He kept little fishes
Minnow small
In washing tubs three
As the stal
In spite
Of a glove
Of the might
Not above
Of the Maid,
The size
Nor afraid
Of a nice
Of his Granny-good
Little Baby’s
He often would
Little finger —
Hurly burly
O he made
Get up early
’Twas his trade
And go
Of Fish a pretty kettle
By hook or crook
A kettle —
To the brook
A kettle —
And bring home
Of Fish a pretty kettle

Miller’s thumb,
A kettle!

In a later letter to his sister he makes much the same confession in a different key, when he bids her ask him for any kind of present she fancies, only not for live stock to be kept in captivity, ‘though I will not now be very severe on it, remembering how fond I used to be of Goldfinches, Tomtits, Minnows, Mice, Ticklebacks, Dace, Cock salmons and all the whole tribe of the Bushes and the Brooks.’ Despite the changes which have overbuilt and squalidly or sprucely suburbanized all those parts of Middlesex, the Pymmes brook still holds its course across half the county, is still bridged by the main street of Edmonton, and runs countrywise, clear and open, for some distance along a side street on its way to join the Lea. Other memories of it, and of his childish playings and musings beside it, find expression in Keats’ poetry where he makes the shepherd-prince Endymion tell his sister Peona how one of his lovesick vagaries has been to sit on a stone and bubble up the water through a reed, —

So reaching back to boyhood: make me ships
Of moulted feathers, touchwood, alder chips,
With leaves stuck in them; and the Neptune be
Of their petty ocean.

If we learn little of Keats’ early days from his own lips, we have sufficient testimony as to the impression which he made on his school companions; which was that of a fiery, generous little fellow, handsome and passionate, vehement both in tears and laughter, and as placable and loveable as he was pugnacious. But beneath this bright and mettlesome outside there lay deep in his nature, even from the first, a strain of painful sensibility making him subject to moods of unreasonable suspicion and self-tormenting melancholy.

These he was accustomed to conceal from all except his brothers, to whom he was attached by the very closest of fraternal ties. George, the second brother, had all John's spirit of manliness and honour, with a less impulsive disposition and a cooler blood. From a boy he was the bigger and stronger of the two: and at school found himself continually involved in fights for, and not unfrequently with, his small, indomitably fiery senior. Tom, the youngest, was always delicate, and an object of protecting care as well as the warmest affection to the other two.

Here are some of George Keats' recollections, written after the death of his elder brother, and referring partly to their school days and partly to John's character after he was grown up:

I loved him from boyhood even when he wronged me, for the goodness of his heart and the nobleness of his spirit, before we left school we quarrelled often and fought fiercely, and I can safely say and my schoolfellows will bear witness that John's temper was the cause of all, still we were more attached than brothers ever are.

From the time we were boys at school, where we loved, jangled, and fought alternately, until we separated in 1818, I in a great measure relieved him by continual sympathy, explanation, and inexhaustible spirits and good humour, from many a bitter fit of hypochondriasm. He avoided teazing any one with his miseries but Tom and myself, and often asked our forgiveness; venting and discussing them gave him relief.

Let us turn now from these honest and warm brotherly reminiscences to their confirmation in the words of two of Keats' school friends; and first in those of his junior Edward Holmes, afterwards a musical critic of note and author of a well-known *Life of Mozart*: —

Keats was in childhood not attached to books. His *penchant* was for fighting. He would fight any one — morning, noon, and night, his brother among the rest. It was

meat and drink to him. Jennings their sailor relation was always in the thoughts of the brothers, and they determined to keep up the family reputation for courage; George in a passive manner; John and Tom more fiercely. The favourites of John were few; after they were known to fight readily he seemed to prefer them for a sort of grotesque and buffoon humour. I recollect at this moment his delight at the extraordinary gesticulations and pranks of a boy named Wade who was celebrated for this…. He was a boy whom any one from his extraordinary vivacity and personal beauty might easily fancy would become great — but rather in some military capacity than in literature. You will remark that this taste came out rather suddenly and unexpectedly. Some books of his I remember reading were *Robinson Crusoe* and something about Montezuma and the Incas of Peru. He must have read Shakespeare as he thought that ‘no one would care to read *Macbeth* alone in a house at two o’clock in the morning.’ This seems to me a boyish trait of the poet. His sensibility was as remarkable as his indifference to be thought well of by the master as a ‘good boy’ and to his tasks in general…. He was in every way the creature of passion…. The point to be chiefly insisted on is that he was *not literary — his love of books and poetry manifested itself chiefly about a year before he left school*. In all active exercises he excelled. The generosity and daring of his character with the extreme beauty and animation of his face made I remember an impression on me — and being some years his junior I was obliged to woo his friendship — in which I succeeded, but not till I had fought several battles. This violence and vehemence — this pugnacity and generosity of disposition — in passions of tears or outrageous fits of laughter — always in extremes — will help to paint Keats in his boyhood. Associated as they were with an extraordinary beauty of person and expression, these qualities captivated the boys, and no one was more popular.

Entirely to the same effect is the account of Keats given by a school friend seven or eight years older than himself, to whose appreciation and encouragement the world most likely owes it that he first became aware of his own vocation for poetry. This was the aforementioned Charles Cowden Clarke, the son of the head master, who towards the close of a long life, during which he had deserved well of literature and of his generation in more ways than one, wrote retrospectively of Keats: —

He was a favourite with all. Not the less beloved was he for having a highly pugnacious spirit, which when roused was one of the most picturesque exhibitions — off the stage — I ever saw. One of the transports of that marvellous actor, Edmund Kean — whom, by the way, he idolized — was its nearest resemblance; and the two were not very dissimilar in face and figure. Upon one occasion when an usher, on account of some impertinent behaviour, had boxed his brother Tom's ears, John rushed up, put himself into the received posture of offence, and, it was said, struck the usher — who could, so to say, have put him in his pocket. His passion at times was almost ungovernable; and his brother George, being considerably the taller and stronger, used frequently to hold him down by main force, laughing when John was 'in one of his moods,' and was endeavouring to beat him. It was all, however, a wisp-of-straw conflagration; for he had an intensely tender affection for his brothers, and proved it upon the most trying occasions. He was not merely the favourite of all, like a pet prize-fighter, for his terrier courage; but his highmindedness, his utter unconsciousness of a mean motive, his placability, his generosity, wrought so general a feeling in his behalf, that I never heard a word of disapproval from any one, superior or equal, who had known him.

The same excellent witness records in agreement with the last that in his earlier school days Keats showed no particular signs of an intellectual bent, though always

orderly and methodical in what he did. But during his last few terms, that is in his fifteenth and sixteenth years, he suddenly became a passionate student and a very glutton of books. Let us turn again to Cowden Clarke's words: —

My father was in the habit, at each half-year's vacation, of bestowing prizes upon those pupils who had performed the greatest quantity of voluntary work; and such was Keats' indefatigable energy for the last two or three successive half-years of his remaining at school, that, upon each occasion, he took the first prize by a considerable distance. He was at work before the first school-hour began, and that was at seven o'clock; almost all the intervening times of recreation were so devoted; and during the afternoon holidays, when all were at play, he would be in the school — almost the only one — at his Latin or French translation; and so unconscious and regardless was he of the consequences of so close and persevering an application, that he never would have taken the necessary exercise had he not been sometimes driven out for the purpose by one of the masters….

One of the silver medals awarded to Keats as a school prize in these days exists in confirmation of this account and was lately in the market. Cowden Clarke continues: —

In the latter part of the time — perhaps eighteen months — that he remained at school, he occupied the hours during meals in reading. Thus, his *whole* time was engrossed. He had a tolerably retentive memory, and the quantity that he read was surprising. He must in those last months have exhausted the school library, which consisted principally of abridgements of all the voyages and travels of any note; Mavor's collection, also his *Universal History*; Robertson's histories of Scotland, America, and Charles the Fifth; all Miss Edgeworth's productions, together with many other books equally well calculated for youth. The books, however, that were his constantly recurrent sources of attraction were Tooke's *Pantheon*, Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary*, which he

appeared to *learn*, and Spence's *Polymetis*. This was the store whence he acquired his intimacy with the Greek mythology; here was he 'suckled in that creed outworn;' for his amount of classical attainment extended no farther than the *Æneid*, with which epic, indeed, he was so fascinated that before leaving school he had *voluntarily* translated in writing a considerable portion….

He must have gone through all the better publications in the school library, for he asked me to lend him some of my own books; and, in my 'mind's eye,' I now see him at supper (we had our meals in the schoolroom), sitting back on the form, from the table, holding the folio volume of Burnet's *History of his Own Time* between himself and the table, eating his meal from beyond it. This work, and Leigh Hunt's *Examiner* — which my father took in, and I used to lend to Keats — no doubt laid the foundation of his love of civil and religious liberty.

In the midst of these ardent studies of Keats' latter school days befell the death of his mother, who had been for some time in failing health. First she was disabled by chronic rheumatism, and at last fell into a rapid consumption, which carried her off at the age of thirty-five in February 1810. We are told with what devotion her eldest boy attended her sickbed,— 'he sat up whole nights with her in a great chair, would suffer nobody to give her medicine, or even cook her food, but himself, and read novels to her in her intervals of ease,' — and how bitterly he mourned for her when she was gone,— 'he gave way to such impassioned and prolonged grief (hiding himself in a nook under the master's desk) as awakened the liveliest pity and sympathy in all who saw him.'

From her, no doubt, came that predisposition to consumption which showed itself in her youngest son from adolescence and carried him off at nineteen, and with the help of ill luck, over-exertion, and distress of mind, wrecked also before twenty-five the robust-seeming frame and

constitution of her eldest, the poet. Were the accounts of her character less ambiguous, or were the strands of human heredity less inveterately entangled than they are, it would be tempting, when we consider the deep duality of Keats' nature, the trenchant contrast between the two selves that were in him, to trace to the mother the seeds of one of those selves, the feverishly over-sensitive and morbidly passionate one, and to his father the seeds of the other, the self that was all manly good sense and good feeling and undisturbed clear vision and judgment. In the sequel we shall see this fine virile self in Keats continually and consciously battling against the other, trying to hold it down, and succeeding almost always in keeping control over his ways and dealings with his fellow-men, though not over the inward frettings of his spirit.

In the July following her daughter's death, Mrs Jennings, being desirous to make the best provision she could for her orphan grandchildren, 'in consideration of the natural love and affection which she had for them,' executed a deed putting them under the care of two guardians, to whom she made over, to be held in trust for their benefit from the date of the instrument, the chief part of the property which she derived from her late husband under his will. The guardians were Mr Rowland Sandell, merchant, who presently renounced the trust, and the aforesaid Mr Richard Abbey, tea-dealer. Mrs Jennings survived the execution of this deed more than four years, but Mr Abbey seems at once to have taken up all the responsibilities of the trust. Under his authority John Keats was withdrawn from school at the end of the summer term, 1811, when he was some months short of sixteen, and made to put on harness for the practical work of life. With no opposition, so far as we learn, on his own part, he was bound apprentice to a Mr Thomas Hammond, a surgeon and apothecary of good repute at Edmonton, for the customary term of five years.

The years between the sixteenth and twentieth of his age are the most critical of a young man's life, and in these years, during which our other chief London-born poets, Spenser, Milton, Gray, were profiting by the discipline of Cambridge and the Muses, Keats had no better or more helpful regular training than that of an ordinary apprentice, apparently one of several, in a suburban surgery. But he had the one advantage, to him inestimable, of proximity to his old school, which meant free access to the school library and continued encouragement and advice in reading from his affectionate senior, the head master's son. The fact that it was only two miles' walk from Edmonton to Enfield helped much, says Cowden Clarke, to reconcile him to his new way of life, and his duties at the surgery were not onerous. As laid down in the ordinary indentures of apprenticeship in those times, they were indeed chiefly negative, the apprentice binding himself 'not to haunt taverns or playhouses, not to play at dice or cards, nor absent himself from his said master's service day or night unlawfully, but in all things as a faithful apprentice he shall behave himself towards the said master and all his during the said term.'

Keats himself, it is recorded, did not love talking of his apprentice days, and has left no single written reference to them except the much-quoted phrase in a letter of 1819, in which, speaking of the continual processes of change in the human tissues, he says, 'this is not the same hand which seven years ago clenched itself at Hammond.' It was natural that the same fiery temper which made him as a small boy square up against an usher on behalf of his brother, — an offence which the headmaster, according to his son Cowden Clarke, 'felt he could not severely punish,' — it was natural that this same temper should on occasion flame out against his employer the surgeon. If Keats' words are to be taken literally, this happened in the second year of his apprenticeship. Probably it was but the affair of a moment: there is no evidence of any habitual disagreement or final

breach between them, and Keats was able to put in the necessary testimonial from Mr Hammond when he presented himself in due course for examination before the Court of Apothecaries. A fellow-apprentice in after years remembered him as ‘an idle loafing fellow, always writing poetry.’ This, seeing that he did not begin to write till he was near eighteen, must refer to the last two years of his apprenticeship and probably represents an unlettered view of his way of employing his leisure, rather (judging by his general character) than any slackness in the performance of actual duty. One of the very few glimpses we have of him from outside is from Robert Hengist Horne (‘Orion’ Horne), another alumnus of the Enfield school who lived to make his mark in literature. Horne remembered Mr Hammond driving on a professional visit to the school one winter day and leaving Keats to take care of the gig. While Keats sat in a brown study holding the reins, young Horne, remembering his school reputation as a boxer, in bravado threw a snowball at him and hit, but made off into safety before Keats could get at him to inflict punishment. The story suggests a picture to the eye but tells nothing to the mind.

Our only real witness for this time of Keats’ life is Cowden Clarke. He tells us how the lad’s newly awakened passion for the pleasures of literature and the imagination was not to be stifled, and how at Edmonton he plunged back into his school occupations of reading and translating whenever he could spare the time. He finished at this time his prose version of the *Aeneid*, and on free afternoons and evenings, five or six times a month or oftener, was in the habit of walking over to Enfield, — by that field path where Lamb found the stiles so many and so hard to tackle, — to see his friend Cowden Clarke and bring away or return borrowed books. Young Clarke was an ardent liberal and disciple of Leigh Hunt both in political opinions and literary taste. In summer weather he and Keats would sit in a shady arbour in the old school garden, the elder reading poetry to the

younger, and enjoying his looks and exclamations of delight. From the nature of Keats' imitative first flights in verse, it is clear that though he hated the whole 'Augustan' and post-Augustan tribe of social and moral essayists in verse, and Pope, their illustrious master, most of all, yet his mind and ear had become familiar, in the course of his school and after-school reading, with Thomson, Collins, Gray, and all the more romantically minded poets of the middle and later eighteenth century. But the essential service Clarke did him was in pressing upon his attention the poetry of the great Elizabethan and Jacobean age, from *The Shepheard's Calendar* down to *Comus* and *Lycidas*,— 'our older and nobler poetry,' as a few had always held it to be even through the Age of Reason and the reign of Pope and his followers, and as it was now loudly proclaimed to be by all the innovating critics, with Leigh Hunt and Hazlitt among the foremost.

On a momentous day for Keats, Cowden Clarke introduced him for the first time to Spenser, reading him the *Epithalamion* in the afternoon and at his own eager request lending him the *Faerie Queene* to take away the same evening. With Spenser's later imitators, playful or serious, as Shenstone and Thomson, Beattie and the more recent Mrs Tighe, Keats, we know, was already familiar; indeed he owned later to a passing phase of boyish delight in Beattie's *Minstrel* and Tighe's languorously romantic *Psyche*. But now he found himself taken to the fountain head, and was enraptured. It has been said, and truly, that no one who has not had the good fortune to be attracted to the *Faerie Queene* in boyhood can ever quite wholeheartedly and to the full enjoy it. The maturer student, appreciate as he may its innumerable beauties and noble ethical temper, can hardly fail to be critically conscious also of its arbitrary forms of rime and language, and sated by its melodious redundance: he will perceive its faults now of scholastic pedantry and now of flagging inspiration, the perplexity and

discontinuousness of the allegory, and the absence of real and breathing humanity amidst all that luxuriance of symbolic and decorative invention, and prodigality of romantic incident and detail. It is otherwise with the greedy and indiscriminate imaginative appetite of boyhood. I speak as one of the fortunate who know by experience that for a boy there is no poetical revelation like the *Faerie Queene*, no pleasure equal to the pleasure of being rapt for the first time along that ever-buoyant stream of verse, by those rivers and forests of enchantment, glades and wildernesses alive with glancing figures of knight and lady, oppressor and champion, mage and Saracen, — with masque and combat, pursuit and rescue, the chivalrous shapes and hazards of the woodland, and beauty triumphant or in distress. Through the new world thus opened to him Keats went ranging with delight: 'ramping' is Cowden Clarke's word: he showed moreover his own instinct for the poetical art by fastening with critical enthusiasm on epithets of special felicity or power. For instance, says his friend, 'he hoisted himself up, and looked burly and dominant, as he said, "What an image that is — *sea-shouldering whales*!"'

Spenser has been often proved not only a great awakener of the love of poetry in youth, but a great fertilizer of the germs of original poetical power where they exist; and Charles Brown, Keats' most intimate companion during the two last years of his life, states positively that it was to the inspiration of the *Faerie Queene* that his first notion of attempting to write was due. 'Though born to be a poet, he was ignorant of his birthright until he had completed his eighteenth year. It was the *Faerie Queene* that awakened his genius. In Spenser's fairyland he was enchanted, breathed in a new world, and became another being; till enamoured of the stanza, he attempted to imitate it, and succeeded. This account of the sudden development of his poetic powers I first received from his brothers and afterwards from himself. This, his earliest attempt, the *Imitation of Spenser*,

is in his first volume of poems, and it is peculiarly interesting to those acquainted with his history.' Cowden Clarke places the attempt two years earlier, but his memory for dates was, as he owns, the vaguest. We may fairly take Brown to be on this point the better informed of the two, and may assume that it was some time in the second year after he left school that the Spenser fever took hold on Keats, and with it the longing to be himself a poet. But it was not with Spenser alone, it was with other allegoric and narrative poets as well, his followers or contemporaries, that Keats was in these days gaining acquaintance. Not quite in his earliest, but still in his very early, attempts, we find clear traces of familiarity with the work both of William Browne of Tavistock and of Michael Drayton, and we can conceive how in that charming ingenuous retrospect of Drayton's on his boyish vocation to poetry, addressed to his friend Henry Reynolds, Keats will have smiled to find an utterance of the same passion that had just awakened in his own not very much maturer self.

Let it be remembered moreover that the years of Keats' school days and apprenticeship were also those of the richest and most stimulating outburst of the new poetry in England. To name only their chief products, — the *Lyrical Ballads* of Coleridge and Wordsworth had come while he was only a child: during his school days had appeared Wordsworth's still richer and not less challenging volumes of 1807, and the succession of Scott's romantic lays (but these last, in spite of their enormous public success, it was in circles influenced by Leigh Hunt not much the fashion to admire): during his apprentice years at Edmonton, the two first cantos of Byron's *Childe Harold* and the still more overwhelmingly successful series of his Eastern tales: and finally Wordsworth's *Excursion*, with which almost from the first Keats was profoundly impressed. But it was not, of course, only by reading poetry that he was learning to be a poet. Nature was quite as much his teacher as books; and