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JOHN KEATS: MEDICAL STUDENT,  
QUALIFIED SURGEON AND POET

BY

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# JOHN KEATS: MEDICAL STUDENT, QUALIFIED SURGEON AND POET\*

By T. WILSON PARRY, M.A., M.D., F.S.A.,

Vice-President, Hist. Med. Sect. Ann. Meeting, B.M.A., 1933

JOHN KEATS was born on October 29th, 1795, at the "Swan and Hoop" Inn,<sup>1</sup> Finsbury Pavement, London. His father, Thomas Keats, was said to have been with his employer, Mr. John Jennings, since he was a lad, and rose to be manager of the livery stables attached to the inn, marrying his only daughter, Frances.<sup>2</sup> About the time of their marriage, Jennings, who was a man of means, retired to live in the country, leaving the business in the hands of his son-in-law.

In 1803, when John was eight years old, he was sent with his brother George, who was sixteen months his junior, to an excellent school at Enfield, kept by a Mr. John Clarke. Keats remained at this school for eight years, during which time he acquired a taste for reading and a love for literature, which was stimulated by the headmaster's son,<sup>3</sup> Charles Cowden Clarke, who was a young master at the school and only eight years the poet's senior. Keats devoured all the books in the school library, his favourites being Spenser's "Fairie Queene," Virgil's "Æneid," Milton, Burnet's "History of His Own Time," Tooke's "Pantheon," Lemprière's "Classical Dictionary," which he appeared to commit to memory, and Spence's "Polymetis." From these last three books he acquired his perfect intimacy with Greek mythology. At the age of sixteen, after his mother's death, he was taken from school and apprenticed (1811) for five years to a general practitioner named Thomas Hammond, at Edmonton, only two miles from Enfield. Keats remained with Hammond only four years, as a disagreement arose between them. Hammond, however, must have given him a satisfactory certificate, or he would not have been admitted into a London hospital.

At the time Keats came up to London from Edmonton (September, 1815), the hospitals of Guy's and St. Thomas's were amalgamated for teaching purposes, but it was necessary for a student to attach himself either to the one or the other. Keats entered Guy's Hospital on October 2nd, 1815, and took lodgings in 8, Dean Street, Borough, where he remained for the first three months. It was said to have been owing to Mr. (afterwards Sir Astley) Cooper that during his second term, early in 1816, he removed from his lonely lodging in Dean Street to a house belonging to a man named Markham, who owned a chandler's shop in St. Thomas's Street, over which he lodged. George Cooper, a senior student, who had dressed for Astley Cooper for sixteen months, and who afterwards became demonstrator of Anatomy at St. Thomas's, took Keats under his friendly wing. There were two other students in the same house of the same year as Keats himself: George Wilson

Macereth, and Henry Stephens. The latter, himself a poet, was engaged at that time in writing a tragedy, and he proved a congenial companion to Keats. Stephens, when qualified, settled as a general practitioner at Redbourne, in Hertfordshire. He then gave up play-writing to experiment on the therapeutic uses of creosote, which drug, it is said, he introduced into the profession. He is best known, however, as the inventor of a celebrated ink, which still holds its place as one of the best of its kind in Great Britain. Henry Stephens says that "little Keats" (he was called this on account of his height, which was only 5 feet) "was fairly popular, but was often teased on his pride, his poverty, and even on his birth."<sup>4</sup> Sir John Ward Richardson, who knew Stephens intimately for eight years (1856-1864), tells us that Stephens had told him Keats was always at the window peering into space, so that the window-seat was spoken of by his comrades as "Keats's place." Here his inspirations seemed to come most freely. It was here one evening in the twilight, when the two students were sitting together, Stephens at his medical studies, Keats at his dreaming, Keats broke out suddenly that he had composed a new line:

"A thing of beauty is a constant joy."

"What think you of that, Stephens?"

"It has the true ring, but is wanting in some way," replied the latter, as he resumed his medical studies. An interval of silence, and again the poet suddenly exclaimed:

"A thing of beauty is a joy for ever."

"What think you of *that*, Stephens?"

"That it will live for ever," said Stephens. This prophecy has come true. As everyone knows, it is the first line of his "Endymion."

On March 3rd, 1816, Keats was appointed dresser to Mr. Lucas, who has been described by Mr. South<sup>5</sup> as "a tall, ungainly, awkward man, with sloping shoulders and a shuffling walk, as deaf as a post, not overburdened with brains of any kind, but very good-natured and easy, and liked by everyone."<sup>6</sup> The surgeon on going his round in the hospital was followed by four students, two of whom had to be dressers, and the other two surgical pupils or apprentices. Each of the dressers carried a tin plaister box, in shape not unlike a knife-box. The surgeons provided their own instruments, and usually did the first few dressings after an operation. The surgeon and most of his attendant pupils went round the wards with their hats on. The more industrious dressers kept notes of their own cases, but such were not usually required. The only medicines used on the surgical side were calomel, Dover's powder and castor oil. Keats, when a student, is described as "dressing shabbily, carelessly, disregarding appearances as he did opinions, and possessing an amount of moral and physical

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courage which stood him in good stead—a sort of "terrier courage," as Stephens calls it.

Among the Keats relics bequeathed by the late Sir Charles Dilke to the Hampstead Public Library, and now in the custody of the Keats Memorial Museum,<sup>7</sup> is a little book, 7½ inches long by 3½ inches broad, with Keats's autograph on its first page. This book has a worn leather cover, and in it Keats had made a fair copy of the anatomical and physiological rough notes he had taken down at lectures. It is written in ink, in small, neat lettering, and can be read not uneasily. One end of the book is devoted to his anatomical lectures, and the other to physiological ones. In the course of the notes, which are full and clear, on most pages a small marginal space has been left, and on one page, among the anatomical notes, there are four little pen-and-ink drawings placed the one beneath the other. They are all of flowers, and quite daintily drawn. The top one, I take it, is a pansy; then what looks like a daffodil; then follows a nondescript flower with its stalk inserted into a medicine bottle. The fourth one represents a flower, but what it is meant to be it is impossible to say, as it has two different kinds of leaves emanating from its stem. These are all evidence of a distraction from the "dry bones" he was attempting mentally to assimilate. At the physiological end of the book is the Dilke book-plate, and just below it a very bad line-drawing of an inverted skull, and the upper half of a second one. These little points all verify the fact that Keats found a difficulty in giving undivided attention to his work. He had confessed to his bosom friend, Cowden Clarke, that his profession was not of his own choice; and there is little doubt that it was Richard Abbey, his guardian, who had chosen it for him. He made no secret to Clarke that "he could not sympathise with the science of anatomy as a main pursuit in life." He said, in illustration of his argument: "The other day, for instance, during a lecture, there came a sunbeam into the room, and with it a whole troop of creatures floating in the ray, and I was off with them to Oberon and fairyland." "In the lecture room," Stephens says, "he seemed to sit apart, and to be absorbed in something else, as if the subject suggested thoughts to him which were not practically connected with it." In spite of this, and "his self-styled unfitness for the work," Clarke tells us: "I was informed that at his examination he displayed an amount of acquirement which surprised his fellow students." He presented himself before the Society of Apothecaries on July 25th, 1816, and passed his qualifying examination "with credit." It is interesting to note here that Bright, a young student fresh from Cambridge, was a contemporary of Keats, and that two years later Addison followed. Keats never practised. Writing to Charles Brown, he said: "My last operation was the opening of a man's temporal artery. I did it with the utmost nicety, but reflecting on what passed through my mind at the time, my dexterity seemed a miracle, and I never took up the lancet again." It is true that on three occasions at various later dates he refers to his profession: once when he announces his intention to accept a post as surgeon on board an "Indiaman," and on two other occasions when he talks bitterly of his literary prospects, and solaces himself with the

thought that his gallipots—to which, by the way, the Edinburgh reviewers were strongly advising him to return—might still yield him a livelihood.

The medical history of the Keats family is illustrative of a tubercular tendency to four generations. We know nothing of the family history of Thomas Keats, who originally hailed from the west country,<sup>8</sup> and was killed by a fall from his horse in 1804. On Keats's maternal side we know no farther back than his grandmother, Frances Jennings, who was born in the village of Colne, in Yorkshire, and died at Edmon-ton in December, 1814, at a fairly advanced age. His mother (1775-1810) died of phthisis when thirty-five. Keats's brother George escaped the disease himself, but two children and two grandchildren inherited it. Tom Keats, the poet's youngest brother, died of it in 1818, when nineteen years old. The only one of the family neither to have it herself, nor propagate it to any of her four children, was Keats's only sister, Fanny.<sup>9</sup>

The health of Keats himself must now be considered. He was a seven months' child, but appeared to grow out of any delicacy he might have inherited. He escaped all the usual child illnesses, and became strong and vigorous during his eight years of school life.<sup>10</sup> Cowden Clarke tells us he possessed a highly pugnacious spirit which was ready at any moment to defend weakness of any kind, and gives us two episodes in his life which illustrate his physical strength and daring. Keats one day discovered a butcher-boy, much taller and stronger than himself, tormenting a kitten. He at once interposed. The two fought for nearly an hour. Keats discovered a weak point in his adversary, and returned to it every round with such persistence that the contest ended in the butcher-boy being led away or carried off the field. On another occasion one of the young masters boxed his youngest brother, Tom's, ears for impertinence. Keats rushed up, put himself in the posture of offence, and actually struck the master, whom Clarke says "could easily have put him in one of his pockets."

Keats wrote his "Endymion" in 1817. It took him seven months of strenuous work to accomplish this, which exhausted him much. In a letter to Bailey he wrote: "I feel from my employment that I shall never again be secure in Robustness." Early in March, 1818, he went to Teignmouth to companion his brother Tom, who had been wintering there on account of phthisis. Shortly after he arrived Tom had a severe relapse, and it was not till May that he could bring him back to Hampstead. For five weeks longer he nursed his brother, having been with him altogether over three months. During most of this time the weather had been bad, which necessarily kept the two brothers in close contact. I have little doubt that it was during this period that Keats himself contracted the disease, as he was exceedingly unwell when the month of June arrived. It had been previously arranged that he and his friend Charles Armitage Brown were to take a walking tour, and as Tom appeared temporarily better, and Keats himself was far from well, it was thought the change might do him good. So they started, as their intention had been, on June 22nd. Looking back upon this

time, it is certain that the wisest course for Keats to have adopted was for him to have foregone his tour and taken a long rest-cure instead. It would have given him the one chance of regaining his health, but, alas! it was not to be. The walking tour turned out a painful fiasco: the weather was deplorable, and they each of them possessed only the single suit they wore, and they carried but a scanty supply of undergarments in their knapsacks. They repeatedly were drenched through, and the accommodation they were able to obtain was very poor, and the food worse. Altogether they coached 400 miles, and walked over 600. When they arrived at Inverness, Keats's throat was so bad that he consulted a doctor, who was shocked at his general condition, and advised him to return home at once. He accordingly made use of a Cromartie fishing smack that was just starting for London, while Brown continued his tramp alone. Keats arrived in London on August 18th, and immediately hastened to Hampstead, where he found his brother desperately ill. Although in a poor condition himself, and already most certainly infected with tubercle, he continued the nursing of his dying brother, who after a lingering illness of about three and a-half months, passed away on December 1st. Altogether Keats had been in very close contact with his brother for nearly seven months, with a disease for which he had an hereditary predisposition. When we consider the treatment meted out in those days to a tubercular patient, it is not surprising that the affection received the name of a "decline," and a truly rapid decline it must have been in the majority of cases. Every window had to be closed to prevent the patient "from getting a chill." When hæmoptysis supervened, resort was immediately taken by the surgeon to venesection. A most sparing diet was ordered. Keats himself remarked when being treated in this manner "that the food he got wasn't enough to keep a mouse alive." After Tom's death, Keats went to live with Charles Armitage Brown, in Wentworth Place, Hampstead. During the year 1819, although the disease was making rapid headway, Keats wrote some of his most brilliant poems: "The Eve of St. Agnes," "Lamia," "Hyperion," and his exquisite odes; but this was his last year of composition. There is no doubt that his absorbing love for Fanny Brawne at this period was the stimulating factor for this fine work. During 1820, repeated hæmorrhages prevented him doing more than revise poems for his 1820 volume. He wrote nothing new. A consultation was held between Dr. George Darling, a general practitioner of Russell Square, and Dr. William Lambe, a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians, and it was decided that as Keats could not survive another winter in England, it was imperative for him to winter abroad. It was accordingly arranged that he should go in September to Italy. This was another terrible and irretrievable mistake, since it was evident he was quite unfit for the journey—and such a journey! "The *Maria Crowther*, in which he sailed, was a brig of only 120 tons. A single cabin with six bunks gave four, if not five, the wretched accommodation that was the limit of what they could get. Keats, Joseph Severn, a Mrs. Pidgeon and a Miss Cotterell were evidently all in this stuffy cabin. Miss Cotterell was herself suffering from advanced phthisis, and Keats

from his berth gave directions to Severn as to what attention was desirable to be given to her, as she frequently went off into a dead faint. The voyage altogether was a frightful nightmare. First they encountered storms, which were followed by dead calms or adverse winds, so that no progress could be made. Arrived at Naples they were held up by a ten-days' quarantine. Eventually they landed at Naples, only to start their journey of 139 miles to Rome, which they effected in nine days, producing extreme exhaustion in Keats. Keats lingered on till February 23rd, 1821, when he passed away. An autopsy conducted by Dr. (afterwards Sir James) Clark, Dr. Luby, and an Italian physician, stated "the lungs were entirely gone, and they could not understand how he had lived the last two months."

From the poetic productions of John Keats no one would surmise that they were the work of a member of our profession. Indeed, I would go further and say that Keats in his poetry deliberately avoided anything relating either to surgical art or medical science. It seemed to be his ambition to keep poetry and science distinctly separate, not permitting the one to bear any relation to the other. It is not to be denied, however, that Keats's powers of observation, which were naturally alert, were quickened by a five-years' training in scientific methods, and I think there is evidence of this in his writings. I take two examples from "I Stood Tip-toe":

"Where swarms of minnows show their little heads

Staying their wavy bodies 'gainst the stream "

Again,

"Sometimes goldfinches one by one will drop

From low-hung branches. . . .

Or perhaps to show their black and golden wings,  
Pausing upon their yellow flutterings."

These are exact records from Nature.

I cannot think that the opening lines of the "Ode to a Nightingale," would suggest a necessary knowledge of therapeutics, as so many poets and prose writers—Shakespeare, Bacon, Pope, Byron and others—show a decided appreciation of some medical knowledge, and such lines as those I am about to quote would be nothing more than what might be expected from one who had studied literature for its own sake:

"My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains

My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk,

Or emptied some dull opiate to the drains."

Keats was an idealist, and he believed that the Kingdom of Poetry stood apart, far apart and above that of science, and as he had decided to devote his life to the cultivation and adoration of the Beautiful, it must necessarily stand transcendently alone. It was his religion. In more than one place in his letters he speaks of the Mission of the Poet, which to him was the only ideal after which it was worth striving. Speaking from personal experience, I feel I owe a great debt to Keats. Looking back more than forty years to the last year of my medical studentship, I vividly remember there were times when one became satiated with the materialism of medical science. At such times I would make my escape from the hospital feeling impelled to seek a more congenial atmosphere elsewhere. At those times

I always found myself in the Elgin Marble Hall at the British Museum. There, surrounded by the classic and ennobling glories of ancient Greece, I would take from my pocket a small edition of "Keats," and read those inspiring sonnets "On the Elgin Marbles," "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer," or "Ode on a Grecian Urn," and such I found had a tranquillising effect. A new spiritual and intellectual attitude towards life has to be brought about during the transforming influence of the medical student into the mature doctor. Through all this Keats had to plough his way, and the sympathy of our profession will realise more than any other what this would mean to him, who possessed a mind of the highest appreciative order for spiritual and intellectual beauty.

The conflict of materialism and spirituality, as recognised by the love and admiration of the æsthetic, is no better exemplified than in the case of one of the greatest men of science this world has ever known. Charles Darwin, when an undergraduate at Cambridge, was passionately fond of music. His friend, John Maurice Herbert,<sup>14</sup> says: "What gave him (Darwin) the greatest delight was some grand symphony or overture of Mozart or Beethoven, with their full harmonies." Besides a love of music he had at that time a love of fine literature, and Cameron<sup>15</sup> tells us "he used to read Shakespeare to him in his rooms at Christ's, and that he took much pleasure in it. Now listen to what Darwin himself says in his autobiography": "I have said that in one respect my mind has changed during the last twenty or thirty years. Up to the age of thirty, or beyond it, poetry of many kinds, such as the works of Milton, Gray, Byron, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, was an intense delight to me, Shakespeare especially. I have also said that formerly pictures gave me considerable, and music very great, delight. But now for many years I cannot endure to read a line of poetry. I have tried lately to read Shakespeare, and found it so intolerably dull that it nauseated me. I have also almost lost my taste for pictures and music. I retain some taste for fine scenery, but it does not cause me the exquisite delight which it formerly did. This curious and lamentable loss of the higher æsthetic tastes is all the odder, as books on history, biographies and travels (independently of any scientific facts which they may contain), and essays on all sorts of subjects interest me as much as ever they did. My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of facts but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which the higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive. A man with a mind more highly organised or better constituted than mine would not, I suppose, have thus suffered, and if I had to live my life again I would have made a rule to read some poetry and listen to some music at least once

every week, for perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied would thus have been kept active through use. The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature."

On the other hand, there is no doubt that Keats, after relinquishing the medical profession, lost his scientific sense to a great degree by devoting all his time to the study and composition of poetry, and although he reached the highest pinnacle of fame he deprived himself of much that would have exercised a stabilising influence upon his character, and would have been invaluable to him.

Shortly before his death the late Dr. Mitchell Bruce wrote me a beautiful letter from which I give you the following excerpt: "I keep 'Keats' constantly by my side, and when the mood takes me which craves for and deserves intellectual refreshment, I open the leaves. I mostly find myself beginning with 'The Eve of St. Agnes,' or 'Isabella,' or 'To a Nightingale'—surely poetry of the purest strain."

To me Keats is, and ever will be, the doctors' poet. There are many in our profession who find in his best work an inspiration to their lives, and they have learnt to appreciate him as much, if not even more than Shakespeare himself. Twenty-five years was but a short time to live, yet it may be said of Keats that he was one of those who were born never to die. The precious fruits of his genius will endure for evermore. He sacrificed everything in order to give expression to the perpetual beauty in Nature, and he would be a bold man who should aver that such sacrifice had been made in vain.

#### REFERENCES.

- <sup>1</sup> The "Swan and Hoop" has now vanished, but in its place are two inns, "The Globe" and "The Moorgate," at the junction of Fore Street and Finsbury Pavement.
- <sup>2</sup> Sir Sydney Colvin ("Dict. Nat. Biog.").
- <sup>3</sup> "Recollections of Keats by an Old Schoolfellow" (Charles Cowden Clarke) "Atlantic Monthly," January, 1861, p. 87.
- <sup>4</sup> "Disciples of Æsculapius," by Sir Benjamin Ward Richardson, M.D., F.R.C.S., Vol. I, pp. 13-32.
- <sup>5</sup> John Flint South (1797-1882), apprenticed (February 18th, 1814) to Henry Cline, Jr., St. Thomas's Hospital, M.R.C.S. (August 6th, 1819); elected Member of Council of College of Surgeons (March 3rd, 1841); nominated one of the first Fellows of the College of Surgeons (September 27th, 1843); elected President of the Royal College of Surgeons (founded 1843) 1851, and again in 1860.
- <sup>6</sup> "Guy's Hosp. Gazette," March 5th, 1921, pp. 95-99. Article entitled "Junkets," describing Keats's hospital career; reprinted from the "Gazette" of 1905.
- <sup>7</sup> Sir William Hale-White, K.B.E., M.D., consulting physician to Guy's Hospital, has made an exhaustive examination of this notebook, which will be found in "Guy's Hosp. Reports," Vol. LXXV, 1925, pp. 249-262.
- <sup>8</sup> Various given as Dorsetshire, Devonshire or Cornwall.
- <sup>9</sup> Fanny was born in 1803, and married a Spanish refugee named Valentine Llanos, a gifted man, and the author of "Don Estéban," and "Sandoval, the Free-Mason." She died in 1885 at Madrid at the advanced age of eighty-two.
- <sup>10</sup> Seventh Wrangler, 1830; Fellow of St. John's College; later County Court Judge of South Wales Circuit.
- <sup>11</sup> "The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin," by Sir Francis Darwin, F.R.S. (1888), Vol. I, p. 170.
- <sup>12</sup> Lovett Cameron of Trinity College, late Vicar of Shoreham.
- <sup>13</sup> The autobiography of Charles Darwin is contained in "The Life and Letters," etc., by Sir Francis Darwin, Vol. I, pp. 100-101.
- <sup>14</sup> "John Keats," by Dr. Amy Lowell, Vol. II, pp. 481-498.



