

**Nicholas Roe, *John Keats: A New Life*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012. Pp. 446. £25. ISBN: 9780300124651.**

Since the slurs of nineteenth-century reviewers on the shortcomings of John Keats's style, social standing, politics, and masculinity, literary critics and biographers have reassessed these aspects of the poet's life and writing. If reassessment is the dominant practice of literary criticism, then it is no less essential to the art of literary biography. Nicholas Roe's treatment of the life and work of Keats in his new biography of the poet is a point in case. Roe's subtitle, 'A New Life', presses home a sense of urgency for a timely re-evaluation of the life, poetry, and the man. Akin to those biographies of Keats by Sidney Colvin, Walter Jackson Bate, Robert Gittings, Amy Lowell, Aileen Ward, and Andrew Motion, Roe's meticulous account of Keats's early years (1795–1814), challenges the myth of Keats as an ethereal poet, who is untried and untested against a world of actualities.

Confronted from an early age (and throughout his life) by death, economic uncertainty, and feelings of dislocation, Roe regards the birth of Keats's darkling imagination as inextricable from the hardships of everyday reality. Roe's meticulous research sheds light on many of the details of Keats's day-to-day habits in childhood and later medical training at St. Guy's Hospital. This fresh account of Keats's life gives little quarter to ideas of Keats's unworldliness or effeminacy, but finds in his life and work an earthy grounding, as well as a robust style and manner. What is most striking is, as Roe notes, '[t]he sheer physicality of Keats's enjoyment of poetry' (xix) as both a reader and writer. W.B. Yeats's image of Keats as an unmanly, sexually immature, socially inferior, bookish, fancifully ineffectual, and inexperienced 'schoolboy... / With face and nose pressed to a sweet-shop window' ('Ego Dominus Tuus', l. 56-7) is revised by Roe's scholarly, skilful, and sensitive biography.

Throughout Roe's biographical reassessment, there is an adroit handling of how the textures and contours of Keats's life and writing overlap with one another in a series of haunting echoes. The verbal and imagistic echoes of Keats's mature poetry comprise, for Roe, imaginative revisitings to earlier experiences and episodes in the poet's life. The topography of the closing scene of 'Ode to a Nightingale', with its 'still stream' and birdsong 'buried deep', is a 'brilliant reversal of his [Keats's] childish game at Craven Street' (326) with its environs of 'meadows beyond' (11) and 'borders and prospects' (13). Equally, the idyllic landscape of 'To Autumn' caught between the ideal and the real, existential meditation and political statement, action and inaction, living and dying, draws on Keats's formative years. The ode's occupation of a perfectly poised and balanced poetic space which, embodied in the steadied figure of the gleaner, reimagines, as Roe reminds us, 'Libra's scales' known to Keats from his 'schoolboy reading in Bonnycastle's *Introduction to Astronomy*' (356) and present at the time in the popular imagination through images of the Peterloo Massacre (16 August 1819).

Those political, social, and stylistic aspects of Keats's writing deigned to be defective and imperfect by his harshest nineteenth-century critics are championed by Roe as the very strengths and perfection of Keats's poetic achievement. As such Roe's 'New Life' of Keats, with its attention to the details of the poet's childhood and medical training in London, presents the reader with a much darker, edgier, and pugnacious Keats than the one we are familiar with. One of Keats's early childhood homes of 12 Craven Street, located on the 'suburban threshold' (13), at the every edge of a rapidly expanding London (where cityscape

and landscape met one another), Roe argues, had a profound effect on shaping Keats's sense of distinctive yet commingled contrasts and those transitional and marginal poetic spaces that become the preferred haunts of his mature imagination.

Roe's biography conveys Keats's life as passionately lived; one that was inwardly and outwardly felt on the pulses. We are afforded glimpses of taking the evening air and strolling about the streets of London with Keats or dining out with Hunt and others in the circle. Alternatively, we can breathe in the crisp countryside as we roam with Keats through the Lake District or take in the prospect from Ben Nevis. Such snatched insights into how those outer sights and sounds moulded the inner life of Keats are often, as Roe admits, 'open to question' (xx). Such insights are valuable for reminding us of what remains unknown about a life even when it is one as well-documented as that of Keats's own. Ultimately, Roe's biography delights in the fact that Keats's life, like our own, is shrouded in 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts'.

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