

**Robert Morrison, ed., *21<sup>st</sup> Century Oxford Authors - Thomas De Quincey*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 602. £127.50. ISBN 9780199676897.**

On a small and unassuming gravestone in St Cuthbert's Churchyard in Edinburgh are etched the words 'Sacred to the memory of Thomas De Quincey who was born at Greenhay near Manchester August 15<sup>th</sup> 1785 and died in Edinburgh 8<sup>th</sup> December 1859'. To the passer-by unacquainted with the details of the life lived between these two dates, it appears to be the simple resting place of a simple man who traversed this mortal realm much like any of us do; with difficulty, with pleasure, with humility. For those of us who have had the great fortune to have read his works, this place is a shrine to the one we call The Opium-Eater.

The first to document drug addiction in modern literature, De Quincey has become recognised for his ability to combine sunlight and subterranean, finding somewhere in between these the mysteries of human consciousness. In a time when advances in industry gave birth to the East India Company, and opium became the quotidian anodyne for all manner of ailments, De Quincey stumbled upon what may have been his greatest and only lasting passion – the habit of opium-eating. Not eaten, *per se*, but enjoyed in tincture as laudanum, it first quelled what might have been his sudden affliction of trigeminal neuralgia, 'here was a panacea... for all human woes: here was the secret of happiness about which philosophers had disputed for so many ages, at once discovered: happiness might now be bought for a penny...' (37).

In *The Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*, De Quincey describes first the pleasures of opium, followed cruelly by its pains. He paints for us scenes of serenity, of heightened intellect and explains that 'whereas wine disorders the mental faculties, opium, on the contrary... introduces amongst them the most exquisite order, legislation, and harmony' (39). Yet, as with all earthly pleasures there is most certainly always a penalty to pay and opium was no exception as De Quincey decries suffering 'a deep-seated anxiety and gloomy melancholy... wholly incommunicable by words' (60).

Although his *Confessions* may be his most notable work, it is far from his only. Regarded by poets and novelists of his time as something more akin to a 'hack', De Quincey's proliferation of eloquent musings on a multitude of topics really places him as a scholar *par excellence* in his own time: 'Stylistic virtuosity enabled De Quincey to range across a host of diverse topics, and to produce in many essays a prose of knowledge that rose – when a change of topic or emphasis demanded it – into a prose of power' (xviii).

His impassioned prose spans measureless chasms and throws forth interminable questions such as: was De Quincey as aware of his addiction as he claims? Was his writing a mode of repentance? Or did he write knowing all too well how popular this glimpse into addiction would be and how much the reading public would revel in becoming the voyeurs of his opium habit? And it would seem almost impossible to form any one opinion in this lifetime or the next was it not for this most recent compilation of his work by Robert Morrison, surely the *legate a latere* of all things De Quincey.

Until now De Quincey's works have only been available in any whole sense within the 21 volumes by Chatto & Chatto. Morrison has elegantly and fluently delved into the works and excavated the gems that solidify De Quincey's place amid the firmament of Romantic writers who defined their era. His close and tumultuous relationships with Wordsworth and Coleridge, his longing for the hearth of childhood, the devastating grief that stalked him from sister Elizabeth's death bed to the porticos of Oxford Street, the novelty of considering murder a fine art, are all experiences important to the study of his work and life and, in this collection, are made easily accessible thanks to a generous introduction, chronological dexterity and clear notes on the text, being furnished with many insightful illustrations.

To curate De Quincey's life's works is no mean feat, let alone to do it with such discernment and intuition. It is a task that can only be performed by one whose life has become just as infused with De Quincey, as De Quincey's works were infused with opium. The sheer span of his interests means that 'in addition to his work as an autobiographer and addict, [he] also published impressively as a rhetorician, populariser, aesthete, essayist, biographer, true-crime reporter, and literary critic and theorist' (xxxii).

To arrive at the entrance to De Quincey's opulent universe armed with this collection along with Morrison's unrivalled 2009 biography is really to embark upon an education unlike any other. If this was to be the only collection of De Quincey's works we ever had, we would be in possession of a fortune as beloved and sought-after as a vial of opium carried in the waist-coat pocket of the Opium-Eater himself.

*Roisin McCloskey*  
*Ulster University*