



# THE KEATS Foundation

Registered Charity: 1147589

## *THE KEATSIAN*

### *The Newsletter of the Keats Foundation June 2019*

The Keats Foundation Annual Lecture 2019 was delivered to a large audience on Saturday 9 February. Matthew Scott of Reading University took as his theme the question 'How Much Did Keats Really Know?' Ranging widely across Keats's poems and letters, his lecture focused on an aspect of the Keatsian consciousness that is arguably the hardest to understand and most difficult to pin down; that is, the sense that for Keats poetic creation is dependent upon a knowledge of nothing external to itself and is, instead, residing purely in the externalisation of an inner vision that is coherent purely on its own terms.

### *Annual Lecture 2020*

The Keats Foundation Annual Lecture 2020 will take place on Saturday 7 March at 5 pm at Keats House Hampstead. Our speaker will be Alexandra Harris, the distinguished author of *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* and *Weatherlands: Writers and Artists under English Skies*. Tickets will be on sale at Eventbrite – booking essential!

### *Keats Bicentenary Conference 17 – 19 May 2019*

The sixth bicentennial Keats Foundation conference featured some thirty talks by speakers who made their way to Hampstead from across the mazy world. Delegates were treated to excellent keynote lectures by Lucasta Miller, Seamus Perry and Emily Rohrbach. Across the panels on our three days, it was a delight to hear the emerging voices of MA and PhD students alongside those of more established scholars. The conference attracted over a hundred delegates, affirming the enduring interest of both academics and the wider public in the poet's life, work and legacies.

1819, our bicentennial focus, was a troubled, turbulent, watchful time. In her lecture, Lucasta Miller painted a poignant picture of Keats as he attempted to hang on to his faith in authenticity and idealism, painfully aware that the age was running out of idealism. Outward-looking, liberal-minded, keenly aware of his era's injustices, Keats wished to believe that 'all civilized countries become gradually more enlighten'd'. He

looked forward to a 'continual change for the better'. What would he have made of the political climate two hundred years on?

The conference ended in customary manner with a walk through Hampstead's verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways. The heath's woods, grass and wetlands are a haven for broad-leaved helleborine, cowslip, black knapweed, oxeye daisy, pignut and marsh marigold. Like the flowers and shrubs in the gardens at Wentworth Place, they provided Keats with flora to fill the imaginative vistas of his poetic worlds. As always, the walk ended in the beer garden of The Hollybush, an eighteenth-century wood-panelled pub that was known to Keats. Those happy delegates untroubled by train timetables were able to swap conference impressions beneath the liquescent blues of Hampstead's evening skies.

### **Richard Marggraf-Turley**

Speakers from five continents and regular attendees came together in Hampstead over a long weekend in May to make the sixth annual John Keats Conference a truly memorable event. Papers ranged widely on stimulating topics, from palliative pain in *The Fall of Hyperion* and new sources of inspiration for 'La Belle Dame sans Merci' to the technical brilliance and unsettling ambivalence of the Odes. We also heard about the authors and acquaintances who shaped Keats's thinking in 1819 and contemporaries, like Letitia Landon, who we might profitably read his poems alongside. The conference not only reaffirmed what a miraculous, eventful year 1819 was for Keats; his poems and letters seemed 'living', once more, through enterprising readings and a shared sense of his undimmed powers.

### **Sarah Wootton**

Next year's conference will be held at Keats House Hampstead on 15-17 May 2020.

### ***Keats on Video***

The Keats Foundation and Keats House are about to publish on-line video readings of the great Keats Odes. Matthew Coulton (the actor who plays the part of the poet at Keats House) has already been filmed reading three of the great Odes. The remaining three will be filmed during July, and all six Odes will be published on the Keats Foundation website over the summer.



**'A Fruitful Season: Keats in Winchester' by Cecily O'Neill. Directed by Rachel O'Neill. Original Music by Rob Sword. St Lawrence's Church, Winchester, 6-7 July 2019.**

In the popular imagination, John Keats's stay in Winchester in August and September of 1819 was a touristy sojourn, involving long walks along the picturesque water meadows that stretch either side of the River Itchen down to the medieval hospital of St Cross, and culminating in the composition of 'To Autumn'. In reality, Keats was in the middle of a last-ditch effort to make money from his pen, conscious of the fact that without significant improvement in his finances, he could not marry his fiancée Fanny Brawne. Earlier in July, Keats had left London with Brown for the Isle of Wight, where they worked together in Shanklin on a tragedy, *Otho the Great*, intended to showcase

the talents of the greatest tragic actor of the age, Edmund Kean. Shanklin had soon begun to grate on Keats, however, and he missed a 'tolerable library'. After a few weeks, with new hope, he and Brown decamped to Winchester.

What is drawn out so powerfully by Cecily O'Neill's splendid play for 2TimeTheatre about Keats's stay in the market city, 'A Fruitful Season: Keats in Winchester', directed by Rachel O'Neill and introduced by Professor Chris Mulvey, is the sense of desperation that quickly began to settle on the poet as Summer drifted into early Autumn. News arrived that Kean was unavailable, dashing Keats's hopes of a lucrative Drury Lane success. The poet was left pinning his hopes on a new romance, *Lamia*, which he tried to convince himself had 'that sort of fire in it' that would take hold of readers. He was love-sick and, ominously, the sore throat that had plagued him on and off for over a year returned.

Young actors Teddy Morris and Joshua MacGregor did a wonderful job of projecting and performing these tensions, desires and disappointments. Morris inhabited Keats's overheated, increasingly pessimistic imagination in Winchester with aplomb, and MacGregor was equally convincing as the eternally optimistic, gregarious Brown. The pair's word-perfect rendering of technically demanding passages from Keats's poetry and letters was remarkable, and fully realised the ambitions of O'Neill's hour-long, well-attended play, which pulled off the not inconsiderable trick of distilling events and emotions from across that difficult summer into a single animated conversation between Keats and Brown. The bantering energies, shared enthusiasms and loyalties of the pair's friendship were transferred from page to stage in fine style. Naturally, 'A Fruitful Season' paid homage to Keats's most celebrated achievement in Winchester: the settled achievement of the ode 'To Autumn'; but – and absolutely rightly – the ode's seductive sonorities were not allowed to smooth over the angst and self-doubt that marked Keats's visit to the market city. The audience was left with the poet's overwhelming sense of failure and lack of legacy.

Musical accompaniment was ably provided by guitarist Owen Feeney and singer Polly Perry, including a performance of Rob Sword's hauntingly lovely original setting of Keats's lines 'Ever let the Fancy roam'. The stone and wood-panelled acoustics of St Lawrence's Church lent everything a mesmerising clarity and presence. It's to be hoped that O'Neill's play will receive another outing. It fully deserves one.

**Richard Marggraf Turley**



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