

## Introduction



**W**ERE it not for Joseph Severn, John Keats would never have got to Rome in the autumn of 1820 and biographies of the poet would probably end with a couple of lame sentences: ‘He died at the Hotel Villa di Londra, Naples on — October 1820. Nothing is known of his final weeks after he left England.’ In fact, we know a great deal about Keats’s last few months, for not only did Severn take care of him on the journey to Italy and help get him to Rome, he also reported regularly to London on his friend’s physical, intellectual, and emotional disintegration in the period leading up to his death on 23 February 1821. These letters, which are virtually the only record of this time, paint an indelible picture of the trials of both patient and nurse at perhaps the most poignant deathbed in English literary history. They become all the more moving when we visit the place where they were written, the Keats–Shelley House in Rome.

Keats’s sufferings are almost too painful to contemplate. He experienced a miserable death, half-starved, fighting for breath, weakened by frequent bleedings, and deprived of any sedatives to ease his sufferings. He was in such emotional turmoil that he could not bear to see the handwriting of his closest friend Charles Brown, his sister, or Fanny Brawne, the girl who obsessed him to the exclusion of almost everything else. On his deathbed, Keats, who had never had any interest in being an also-ran, came to believe that he had failed in everything that mattered: love, fame, and the making of great poetry. He was desperate to die and determined to be forgotten.

It is a relief to turn to the friend who nursed Keats and whose presence in the Keats–Shelley House is equally vivid. Severn’s oil painting of Shelley, miniatures of Keats and his brothers, his famous sketch of Keats on his deathbed, and one or two letters give a clear sense of his character, a fallible, excitable young man who struggled to keep going. Nothing had prepared him for this, the harshest trial of his life. He had come to Rome expecting to advance his artistic career

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and assist his friend's recovery. Instead, for the last two long months of Keats's life he barely left their lodgings, sitting up for many nights watching over him, sharing his despair and dreading the inevitable outcome. But though we think of Severn in a tragic place, he was by nature irrepressible. He reacted to his terrible situation by taking out his fury on his landlady and 'these wretched Romans' with whom he had to negotiate his life in a language he barely understood. He wrote gossipy letters home, full of comforting fictions about his artistic activities and prospects. He played the piano in the room next to Keats's, trying to cheer them both with spirited performances of Haydn's symphonies. And he read aloud to the dying poet, even if he could not always keep his mind on the words in front of him. Twice he sketched Keats, once, as he said, to keep himself awake at night. It was then, too, that he wrote to Keats's friends in London.

Breathless and uncalculating, Severn's letters did not conceal his many domestic anxieties nor his consciousness of his failings as a nurse. Out of the clutter of his daily concerns, however, a compelling picture of Keats in his last days emerged. Others might have told what they saw differently. Severn lightened the grimness of the scene by his instinct for finding in Keats a quality he had himself: kindness. As Keats's world narrowed at the end, he turned to comforting his comforter. That, at least, was how Severn described him in his last exhausted days of suffering. Keats's solicitude for his deathbed companion and the grace of his dying words as recorded by Severn became an inseparable part of the poet's appeal to posterity.

For the Victorians, the friendship of Keats and Severn was a model of all that was noblest in the annals of selfless masculine companionship. When Severn died almost sixty years after Keats there was outrage that he had not been buried beside his friend in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome. The pressure for his reburial proved irresistible, and in March 1881 he was laid to rest in the same enclosure beneath a matching stone whose triumphant assertion that he had lived to see JOHN KEATS 'numbered among the Immortal Poets of England' tempered the bleak anonymity of Keats's own stone.

In the twentieth century, by contrast, Severn got a more mixed reception as Keats scholars lighted on inaccuracies in his reminiscences of the poet and misrepresentations of his place in the Keats Circle. Amy Lowell was the first to disparage Severn, shouldering him aside in her eagerness to stand next to Keats in his hour of need. Others, like Robert Gittings, as fine a Keats biographer as any, were so irritated by Severn's unreliability as a witness that they could accept little he said at face value. More recently, Severn has been misportrayed

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not just as a lightweight personality but as an equally modest artist, ‘a wannabe painter’ as described in the *Keats–Shelley Review*. Despite the publication in 2005 of Grant Scott’s meticulously edited selection of Severn’s letters and autobiographical pieces, which gives for the first time a sense of Severn’s richly varied life and achievements, the debunking goes on, as in Stanley Plumly’s *Posthumous Keats: A Personal Biography* published in 2008.

Remarkably, however, even the most critical hold back when describing Severn’s time nursing Keats in Rome. Briefly, they raise him to a higher plane: as the deathbed companion, Severn undergoes a transformation before sinking back to his mundane self. This disjointed Severn, caught and ennobled in the spotlight at Keats’s deathbed, owes much to the work of William Sharp, his first biographer. His *Life and Letters of Joseph Severn*, put together in fits and starts and completed in a great hurry in 1891–2, though long known to be unreliable has had an extraordinarily pervasive impact on studies of both Keats and Severn. For Sharp, much of the interest in Severn’s life ended with Keats’s death. Though he devotes many pages to the subsequent history and correspondence of members of the Keats Circle, and some to Severn’s artistic career, his eleven years as British Consul in Rome are covered in just four. Nor is Severn’s rich family life, which Sheila Birkenhead affectionately evoked in her subsequent biography of him, adequately covered. Sharp did a further disservice to his subject, too, by rewriting Severn’s idiosyncratic but colourful prose, producing in the process overwritten accounts of key moments in Keats’s life, which have brought down the wrath of Keats scholars on Severn’s innocent head.

To focus on Severn’s life exclusively in relation to Keats not only distorts that life and Severn’s character but even obscures the nature of his time in Piazza di Spagna. Severn did not become a different being in his few last months with Keats. Knowledge of his early life and temperament deepens the impression we get from his letters that he was as unprepared as a man can be for what he found there. Though he had known death before, it was a reality he found almost impossible to bear. Optimistic as always, he came to Rome with a great deal still to prove, uncertain but ambitious, too. But in Piazza di Spagna in the winter of 1821, even Severn’s optimism was blighted. His trial there was, in consequence, the more moving.

Severn won fame in a painful, unexpected place. His devotion to the dying Keats gave him new standing in the Keats Circle and in his later years made him a legendary figure. But a man cannot thrive, marry, and bring up a large family of unusually gifted children, as Severn did, simply on the memory of a celebrated

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friendship. He never lost his deep sense of indebtedness to Keats: even so, the 385 recently discovered letters he wrote to his wife contain just four references to the poet and she, of course, never knew him. Severn had a life to get on with, a way to make in the world. As his tombstone attests, it was full of interest and achievement, far from the attenuated existence lived in the shadow of poignant memories which has sometimes been assumed. In particular, Severn was a more successful and significant artist than Keats scholars suggest. The best-known part of his life is the story of an untried, volatile man who had to face tragedy and defeat before seeing his confidence in the genius of Keats vindicated as the poet won increasing recognition. But there is much more to Severn than that. Here is an ebullient man who recreated himself more than once, sometimes bruised by the world, but unstoppably exuberant and, whatever his vanities, generous-spirited and instinctively benevolent.

Here, too, is a man with a gift for friendship with extraordinary people. To have been 'The Friend of Keats' would have been sufficient glory for most men. But Severn could also claim friendship with other great contemporaries like Gladstone and Ruskin, Liszt and Mendelssohn, and many other leading artists and writers of his age. This biography sets out for the first time to explore the range of Severn's many friendships and the charm and kindness which drew men to him. Until now he has perhaps been best known as the man who did not shirk the obligations of friendship, travelling to Italy with the dying Keats when other, closer friends made their excuses; but, as this book shows, alongside the obligations of friendship, Severn would also come to know its rich and varied rewards.