

FACULTY OF THE HISTORY & PHILOSOPHY OF  
MEDICINE & PHARMACY

## 2021 Celebrating the bicentenary of John Keats' death



John Keats. Engraving by William Bell Scott (1811- 1890),  
after Joseph Severn (1793-1879), Wellcome Collection.

Our second special issue newsletter features an interview with Professor Sean Hughes who shares his life-long love of Keats.

Keats' power lies not only in his words to move us but in his intriguing career as an apothecary and surgeon.

# Sean Patrick Francis Hughes

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**MF: Tell us a little about yourself?**

**SH** I am Emeritus Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at Imperial College London. I was Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at Imperial College and before that Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery University of Edinburgh. My clinical practice was in spinal surgery and my research interests were in the microcirculation of bone. I have always been interested in history and following retirement obtained the DHMSA in 2014 and the DPMSA in 2015. These excellent courses inspired me to enrol for an MA in history at King's College London which I completed in 2017. Since then, I have remained in contact with the Faculty of History and Philosophy of Medicine and Pharmacy

**MF: What connected you to Keats and where has the inspiration come from?**

**SH:** From my medical student days, I have been enthralled by the poetry of John Keats (1795-1821). There are many poems that I have enjoyed and one particular poem that stays with me is The Eve of St Agnes. I later read Nicholas Roe's inspirational biography of Keats published in 2012.<sup>1</sup> In 2017 and I was honoured to be invited by Dr Christopher Gardner-Thorpe and the Faculty to deliver the Biennial Keats Memorial Lecture which was held at the Apothecaries' Hall in February of that year. In that lecture I explored the relationship between Keats' medical training and his poetry, which led me to study certain aspects of his life.<sup>2</sup>

## **Keats and the Temporal Artery, why he did not practise medicine**

This year I published in the Keats-Shelley Review a paper with the English scholar Hrileena Ghosh<sup>3</sup> who had recently published John Keats' Medical Notebook.<sup>4</sup> In the article we explored the reasons why Keats' trained as a surgeon but never practised medicine. Keats' childhood friend Charles Armitage Brown (1787-1842) had recounted that Keats' last operation involved opening a man's temporal artery.

This intrigued me, why was Keats' opening a temporal artery and for what purpose? In the paper we concluded that John Keats was performing a temporal arteriotomy in order to bleed a patient who had a head injury. This followed the advice of Keats' mentor Ashley Cooper (1768-1841) who stated that in an unconscious patient with a head injury it was important to bleed the patient rather than trephine the skull, as trephining could cause further damage to the brain as well as leading to infection and death. We argued that it was not a single procedure that caused Keats to give up medicine and surgery, but it was the consequences of this procedure combined with his past experience of surgery particularly as a surgical dresser where he had witnessed much suffering. We posited that it was Keats temperament that left him uniquely unsuited to practise medicine, however it was his very ability to relate to suffering and his humanity that allowed Keats to write his greatest poetry.

### **Keats' Consumption and his Doctors**

Dr Noel Snell and I have recently had a paper accepted for publication in the Keats-Shelley Review in 2021 entitled 'Is the criticism of John Keats' doctors justified? A bicentenary re-appraisal'. This paper discusses Keats' consumption and particularly the role of Dr James Clark (1788-1870) the physician who treated Keats in his last fatal illness.

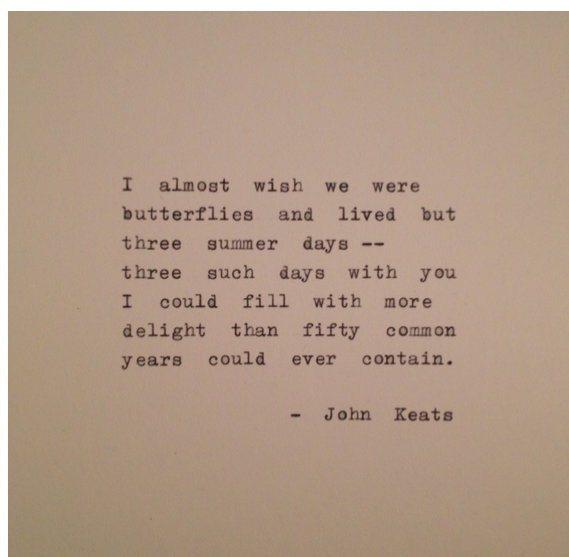


SIR JAMES CLARK, BART., K.C.I.  
*From a Photograph in the Queen's Private Collection.*

There has been much criticism of Dr Clark's management of Keats during his illness in Rome, but in this paper we have attempted to put this into context. We have analysed James Clark's education and practice and his contribution to the management of patients with consumption. Clark wrote several books exploring the influence of climate on the lungs in patients with consumption advocating a healthy climate, along with exercise, a suitable diet and regular venesection.<sup>5</sup> We argued that in light of the medical knowledge at that time James Clark's management of Keats was appropriate and that in fact Clark was a caring and compassionate doctor who devoted his time to tending to Keats' during his terminal illness in Rome.

## References

1. Nicholas Roe, *John Keats, A New Life*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press 2012).
2. Hughes, Sean P F and Hughes, Sarah, *Keats Memorial Lecture: How did John Keats Medical Training Influence his Poetry?*, *The Keats-Shelley Review*, vol 31, no 2, p.136-146, 2017.
3. Ghosh, Hrileena and Hughes, Sean P F, John Keats and the Temporal Artery, *The Keats-Shelley Review*, vol 34, no 2, pp. 107-117, 2020.
4. Hrileena Ghosh, *John Keats' Medical Notebook, Text Context and Poems*, (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).
5. James Clark, *The Sanative Influence of Climate with an account of the Best Places to resort for invalids in England and South of Europe*. (London: John Murray, 1846) 4th edition.



Thank you to Professor Hughes for his personal insights into Keats' life. In our final special issue newsletter, we feature an interview with Dr Noel Snell.

If you would like to join us for this year's Keats Memorial Lecture, to mark the exact bicentenary of Keats' death on 23 February 2021 click [here](#). The Keats Memorial Lecture has been organised in association with King's College London since 1969, [click here](#)

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