R.S. WHITE  

Reviewed by Jack Stillinger.

One can never have too many biographies of John Keats. The most recent, by R. S. White, who has taught at the University of Newcastle on Tyne and currently holds a distinguished chair at the University of Western Australia, is a fine piece of research and writing in the Palgrave Macmillan series of “Literary Lives” (more than fifty titles so far). The work is a subcompact among the more stately sedans and limos of the field—roughly two-fifths the length of Walter Jackson Bate’s masterly *John Keats* of 1963 and half the length of Robert Gittings’s *John Keats* of 1968, the two biographies that still, after nearly half a century, have the best claims to be the standard. But even while comparatively shorter, it has much to offer in the way of new information and ideas. It makes significant contributions at the most advanced level of research and, at the other end of the scale, would be an excellent introduction for college undergraduates and general readers if they could get their hands on it.

Like Douglas Bush and Bate, who published still valuable short biographies of Keats and Coleridge in an earlier Macmillan series (“Masters of World Literature,” 1966 and 1968), White is a seasoned scholar of his subject, having written an undergraduate dissertation on Keats’s poetry and ideas more
than four decades ago and published, along with several other books on the Romantics, a substantial study of Keats’s markings in copies of Shakespeare (Keats as a Reader of Shakespeare, 1987). At this late date in the history of Keats scholarship, the wisdom of maturity leads him to reopen some important questions whose speculative answers we have become accustomed to accept as fact (or else have quit wondering about). In his first chapter, for example, White reminds us that we do not really know for sure the exact date of Keats’s birth (October 29 vs. 31), or the history of his father’s background before marriage to his mother, or where his parents were living at the time he was born, or the cause of the accident that killed his father, or any details concerning his mother’s behavior following the death of his father, including her hasty remarriage two months later to an otherwise unknown person named William Rawlings. White’s skepticism toward widely accepted “facts,” which is evident all through the book, sharply contrasts with Gittings’s way of proceeding, where a suggestion on one page too often becomes “probably” on the next page and “there can be no doubt” shortly after that. In his chapter 8, subtitled “Love, Women and Romance,” White introduces the still mysterious Isabella Jones by emphasizing how little is known about Keats’s meetings with her and the influence she exerted on his poems (132-33). He does say that she is “certainly captured” in a passage describing Bertha in “The Eve of St. Mark,” mainly
because both Bertha (in the poem) and Isabella Jones (in her lodgings in London) had a caged parrot; but there is perhaps some foundation for this assertion in the facts that the poem is securely dated 13-17 February 1819 and that Keats is known to have seen Jones in London a few days before 19 February.

The book’s most valuable contribution is its detailed account of Keats’s medical training in chapter 2, chiefly drawn from White’s two articles in the *Keats-Shelley Review* in 1998 and 1999. White has discovered three different versions of a guidebook published in 1816 as practical advice for medical students entering Guy’s Hospital just at the time Keats was there. The author is one “Aesculapius” (judged to be Sir Astley Cooper and others among the teaching faculty at Guy’s), and it is quite amazing how many ideas and images from this guidebook can be shown to recur in Keats’s letters and poems—even in passages as seemingly unconnected as Keats’s explanations of his “axioms” in poetry (the special meanings of “natural” and “naturally,” 98) and Joseph Severn’s description of the way Keats gave advice to his fellow passengers on the boat en route to Italy (dictating from his bed “surgically—like Esculapius of old in baso-relievo,” 226-27). Also of particular value is the guidebook’s reference to James Edward Smith’s *An Introduction to Physiological and Systematical Botany* (1807), a work not hitherto mentioned by any Keats
scholar, which has passages very close in detail to Keats’s descriptions of flowers and other plants in his best odes (33-35).

Given the wealth of biographical materials accumulated over many decades, it is of course impossible to present a totally new Keats without considerable distortion of the evidence. But there is always room for additional details and fine-tuning. Among White’s contributions I would single out the following: his reading of Endymion in connection with Shakespeare’s Sonnets (81-82); his interpretive remarks on the three extant portraits of Fanny Brawne (136); his extended explication of Keats’s Vale of Soul-making letter as a basis for interpretation of the odes (155-60); a novel point about Keats’s finding negative capability in Edmund Kean’s style of acting (179); a reading of The Fall of Hyperion that links it with Charlotte Smith’s The Emigrants, Keats’s odes, and William Robertson’s History of America (194-95); the suggestion that some of Keats’s letters to Fanny Brawne may have been written “with a more studied eye to posterity” (210); and the idea that The Jealousies shows the influence of Thomas Love Peacock (214).

Without seeming hurried, White manages to pack a lot of information and insight into small space. His discussion of “To Autumn,” for example, provides the usual biographical circumstances; explains a structure of four different time schemes in the poem; draws interesting critical points from
variants in the first draft; explains what links the poem to the Vale of Soul-making letter and to the medical student’s guidebook; identifies literary sources in Chatterton, Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Thomson, Goldsmith, and Collins, among others; and ends with a point about a political subtext in the poem—all this in fewer than six pages of quite leisurely-seeming commentary (201-06).

There are perhaps more errors of detail than is customary among biographers of Keats. Some of them are hardly more than typos: "Blackwell's [for Blackwood's] Edinburgh Magazine" (97), for example; "Walker" and "Wallace" several times for Bryan Waller Procter's middle name (71, 91, 104, 251, 257); and a mistaken end-date for Keats's February-May 1819 journal letter to his brother and sister-in-law in America (155). The most serious factual error is the statement that "Ode on Indolence" was first published in Annals of the Fine Arts in January 1820 (171), when in fact it first appeared in R. M. Milnes’s biography of Keats in 1848. Furthermore, White’s account of the publishers’ interference in the text of “The Eve of St. Agnes” is somewhat muddled by a sentence (in the middle of 137) which seems to suggest that they both objected to-- and insisted on restoring-- “Keats’s first instincts” in his description of the sexual encounter between Madeline and Porphyro. Yet perhaps as a compensation, White’s is the first biography of Keats to mention
Mick Jagger and the Rolling Stones (230), with an endnote reference to the YouTube video of Jagger reading stanzas from Adonais—as a memorial to Brian Jones, founding member of the Stones--to an enormous crowd in London’s Hyde Park in the summer of 1969.

Returning to what I said earlier, I do worry about how this book will reach the audience of undergraduates and general readers that it is best suited for. The current American list price is close to $70—too expensive to be used as a supplementary text in college courses and perhaps even for bookstores to stock or for many academic libraries to acquire. And if acquired, there is no guarantee that it will be available. In my university’s English Library we are currently combing the shelves to select books for transfer to remote storage in a warehouse at the edge of the campus. Such books cannot be picked off the shelf by a casual browser but instead must be formally requested for delivery to the circulation desk a day or two later. Thus the handsome portrait of Keats that adorns the cover of White’s book—the almost photograph-like pencil sketch by Charles Brown—will be seen mainly by a few library workers who handle the books. And then there’s the fact that students these days get most of their information and ideas not from books but from the Web, from Wikipedia in particular. And so, in one’s imagination, the actual audience for the book at hand gets smaller and smaller. One feels extremely lucky to own a review copy!
Jack Stillinger, Center for Advanced Study Professor of English Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, has been reviewing biographies of Keats since the mid-1950s.
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