INTRODUCTION

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Keats's Letters and Their Editors

Keats's reputation as a letter-writer has had its ups and downs. James Freeman Clarke, a well-known Boston and Louisville divine, was permitted to see some of the letters in the hands of George Keats, and as long ago as 1836, in printing parts of two, he enthusiastically declared:

> These have not hitherto been published, but it appears to us, from the specimens which we have seen of them, that they are of a higher order of composition than his poems. There is in them a depth and grasp of thought; a logical accuracy of expression; a fulness of intellectual power, and an earnest struggling after truth, which remind us of the prose of Burns. They are only letters, not regular treatises, yet they touch upon the deepest veins of thought, and ascend the highest heaven of contemplation. . . . We feel a little proud that we, in this western valley, are the first to publish specimens of these writings.[1]

It is a pity that heavy theological and philosophical articles kept other Keats letters from illuminating the transcendental *Western Messenger*, and a dozen years passed before R. M. Milnes included about eighty, wholly or partly, in his biography (1848). "The journal-letters to his [Keats's] brother and sister in America," he said,[2] "are the best records of his outer existence. . . . They are full of a genial life . . . and, when it is remembered how carelessly they are written, how little the writer ever dreamt of their being redeemed from the far West or exposed to any other eyes than those of the most familiar affection, they become a mirror in which the individual character is shown with indisputable truth, and from which the fairest judgment of his very self can be drawn."

[1] *Western Messenger*, Louisville, June, 1836 (I, 773). In December, 1834, George Keats had "indulged" John Howard Payne "with a glance at the private correspondence" of the poet. Three years later, in the *Ladies' Companion*, New York, August, 1837 (VII, 185–187), Payne printed from No. 159 a long prose extract and the poems "Fame like a wayward girl" and "As Hermes once" and also two sentences and the poem "'Tis the witching time" from No. 120.

[2] I, 245 f. For full details about various editions see J. R. MacGillivray, *Keats: A Bibliography and Reference Guide* (Toronto, 1949). Three years after that book appeared Maurice Buxton Forman's fourth edition, *The Letters of John Keats* (Oxford University Press), was published.

Milnes's collection—a new edition appeared in 1867—was unique for thirty years. Unluckily, no attempt was made to improve upon it until 1883, though five years earlier Harry Buxton Forman published a small volume, *Letters of John Keats to Fanny Brawne* (1878), that created a sensation in Great Britain and America. Sir Charles W. Dilke, who had made vain efforts to prevent the publication, while holding back (and apparently destroying) an undisclosed number of the originals,[3] bitterly denounced "the *owners* of these letters" (Fanny Brawne Lindon's children), and declared that "if their publication . . . is the greatest impeachment of a woman's sense of womanly delicacy to be found in the history of literature, Mr. Forman's extraordinary preface is no less notable as a sign of the degradation to which the bookmaker has sunk." [4] A New Yorker, Richard Henry Stoddard, echoed that judgment, demolishing the Lindons, Keats, Forman, and "this most objectionable book." [5] Simultaneously Swinburne, of all persons, was lambasting both the editor and the poet: "While admitting that neither his [Keats's] love-letters, nor the last piteous outcries of his wailing and shrieking agony, would ever have been made public by merciful or respectful editors, we must also admit that, if they ought never to have been published, it is no less certain that they ought never to have been written; that a manful kind of man or even a manly sort of boy, in his love-making or in his suffering, will not howl and snivel after such a lamentable fashion." [6] Matthew Arnold, too, had joined in the hunt (1880). The letters to Fanny Brawne, he pontificated, "ought never to have been published." They show "the abandonment of all reticence and all dignity." Keats writes like "a surgeon's apprentice." He writes "the sort of love-letter of a surgeon's apprentice which one might hear read out in a breach of promise case, or in the Divorce Court." He was a "sensuous man of a badly bred and badly trained sort." [7]

At least one member of the poet's family welcomed the edition.

[3] On September 6, 1890 (*HLB*, IV [1950], 248), he told Fred Holland Day that he had returned to Herbert Lindon "all but one (or possibly two)," but on February 12, 1878 (*More Letters*, p. 101), he wrote to Fanny Keats de Llanos, "A Mr Forman has published, very much against my wish, those of the letters which he has (not those which I have)."

[4] *Athenaeum*, February 16, 1878, p. 218.

[5] *Appleton's Journal*, IV (1878), 379–382.

[6] *Complete Works*, ed. Gosse and Wise, XIV (1926), 297.

[7] *Essays in Criticism, Second Series* (1893), pp. 102–104.

His niece, Emma Keats (Mrs. Philip) Speed, wrote to Señora Llanos from Louisville (April 7, 1878) that, although the family had not consented to Forman's enterprise, she herself did not regret the appearance of the letters: not one of them "fails to increase our respect and admiration" for her uncle, who seemed "to have detected the unlovely qualities of the woman, although he was immovably constant to the last." [8] But the tirades of critics soon made her change her mind. To the same correspondent, October 28, she remarked: "Uncle John's letters were very very sad, but I think ought never to have been published. . . . [Fanny Brawne] was not the least fitted to have been the companion of John Keats with his ardent sensitive nature." [9]

Undaunted by what on May 9, 1878, he described to Señora Llanos as "the vulgar outcry of pressmen here or in America," Forman continued to amass Keatsiana. Two years later (May 18, 1880) he told her that he had personally approached Sir Charles Dilke and had enlisted his aid: "We have agreed to sink our differences of opinion about certain questions affecting your brother, and he has very liberally conceded to me all his materials that are available for the edition of Keats's Works which I am preparing." For the edition (Reeves and Turner, 1883) it was presumably Dilke who allowed him to include two further letters to Fanny Brawne, bringing the total to thirty-nine, where it has remained. Again most of the reviewers fulminated at his impiety, the *Edinburgh Review*, July, 1885,[1] solemnly stigmatizing it as "an act of sacrilege to the memory of Keats," an "act of desecration." With one hundred fifty-seven "miscellaneous letters" of Keats, Forman's 1883 volumes contained an impressive number, one hundred ninety-six.

Meanwhile, in 1878 *Letters of John Keats to Fanny Brawne* had been published in New York by Scribner, Armstrong, and Company, and in 1883 its thirty-seven letters plus seventy-seven to other correspondents reappeared there as volume I of *The Letters and Poems of John Keats* (Dodd, Mead, and Company) edited by John Gilmer Speed. Speed had access to what remained of his grandfather George Keats's manuscripts, but his editorial work was perfunctory, indeed negligible.

[8] *More Letters*, p. 103.

[9] Unpublished letters herein quoted are, if no source is mentioned, in the Harvard Keats Collection.

[1] CLXII, 36.

When thirty-five of the love letters were sold at a London auction on March 2, 1885, realizing £543 17*s.*, a mere fraction of their sales-value today, Keats lovers everywhere were, or pretended to be, greatly aroused, and slurs at Fanny Brawne became more common than ever. But as a dozen are now accessible only in Forman's printed texts, students are grateful to him for having copied and published them when he had the opportunity.[2]

Despite the hostile critics, in 1889 and then in 1895 Forman issued through Reeves and Turner new editions of all the letters he could find, both excellent for their dates. The next editor, Sidney Colvin [3] (Macmillan and Company, 1891), adopted Arnold's point of view. He described Keats's letters to his relatives and friends as "among the most beautiful in our language," but as for those to Fanny Brawne, "in this, which I hope may become the standard edition of his correspondence, they shall find no place." They gave the reader, he insisted, an unhappy "sense of eavesdropping, of being admitted into petty private matters with which he has no concern," and hence were still excluded from his reissues (with additions) of 1918 and of 1921, 1925, and 1928. In his biography of Keats (1920) Colvin heaped praise on the other letters: "Their struggling, careless tissue is threaded with such strands of genius and fresh human wisdom that one often wonders whether they are not legacies of this rare young spirit equally precious with the poems themselves."

But in general the nineteenth-century critics were hostile. Many were shocked, even appalled, as they read. Coventry Patmore, for example, who in 1847 had copied a few of Keats's letters for the use of Milnes, finding them terrible and nightmarish, after reading one of Forman's editions in 1888 could "find nothing . . . that deserves a much better name than 'lust,' " and detected "artifice and cold self-consciousness in his most rhapsodical out-pourings." [4] The height of Victorian vituperation was reached by Sir William Watson, who in reviewing Forman's 1889 and then Colvin's 1891 editions, flayed Keats and denied merit to all the letters. "They distinctly

[2] Twenty-five of the autograph letters have been located, and two others are available in facsimile reproductions.

[3] "Their publication," he had remarked in 1887 (*Keats*, New York, p. vi), "must be regretted by all who hold that human respect and delicacy are due to the dead no less than to the living, and to genius no less than to obscurity."

[4] MBF, pp. vii f.

lower one's estimate of Keats as a man— . . . they are emphatically a disservice and an injury to his fame. They bring out in strong light a poor and vulgar side of his nature." [5] The letters are not "pleasant reading." [6] Keats "blurts out everything," he is "the most monotonous reading imaginable," he writes "flat trivialities," he is "jocose without being in the least witty or amusing," he has "an incontinent gushiness which is neither manly nor properly boy-like, but simply hobbledehoyish. And Cockney vulgarity, unfortunately, is never far distant." Compared to Charlotte Brontë's letters Keats's are "the veriest infantine prattle and babble." [7]

To pass by selections in so-called complete editions like Horace E. Scudder's (Boston and New York, 1899) and Nathan Haskell Dole's (London and Boston, 1906), Forman's most important edition of Keats was issued by Gowans and Gray, Glasgow, 1900–1901. In volumes IV and V he brought together two hundred seventeen letters or parts of letters. On this 1901 collection was based the work of his son, Maurice Buxton Forman, whose first Oxford University Press edition (1931) contained two hundred thirty-one letters, his second (1935) two hundred forty-one, his third (1947) and fourth (1952) two hundred forty-four. [8]

In the twentieth century the pendulum of criticism swung in Keats's favor. Whereas the American scholar, Arlo Bates, had in 1896 called the publication of the letters to Fanny Brawne "an outrage incomparably greater than any attack made upon the poet in his lifetime by hostile reviewers," [9] one finds Mr. J. H. Preston describing them as "comparable with the finest ever written," [1] and Mr. Robert Lynd echoing that they "now seem to many of us to be among the most beautiful love-letters ever written." [2] Indeed nobody today, so far as I am aware, is distressed by the love letters, unpleasant as some of them undoubtedly

[5] *National Review*, August, 1890 (XV, 768).

[6] These comments are from his *Excursions in Criticism* (1893), pp. 37–45.

[7] Barclay Dunham assured New York readers in 1901 that the Fanny Brawne letters are "wonderful," "gems," for which "it is unnecessary to make any apologies," but he was praising wares that he and George Broughton were publishing.

[8] Such at least are the figures he himself gives, but one of his letters (No. 238 in his last edition) is a forgery.

[9] *Poems by John Keats* (Boston), p. xvii. Mention should also be made of John Drinkwater, who in *A Book for Bookmen* (1926), p. 215, remarked, "Nothing . . . can ever justify the publication of Keats's love letters to Fanny Brawne."

[1] *The Story of Hampstead* (1948), p. 35.

[2] *Books and Writers* (1952), p. 39.

are; for without them only a half-Keats could be visualized. Instead, all the letters are greatly admired. In 1922 Henry Ellershaw asserted that "For the understanding of the man the letters are more important almost than the poetry, for in them he speaks out as he expresses his hopes, his fears, his aspirations." [3] It is certainly true, as Sir B. Ifor Evans declares, that Keats's "verse is always several stages behind the letters and the letters are the truest criticism of the verse." [4] Praise could scarcely be higher than that bestowed by Mr. T. S. Eliot, who in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (1933) "descants" upon "the general brilliance and profundity of the observations scattered through Keats's letters," and characterizes them as "models of correspondence," a "revelation of a charming personality," "certainly the most notable and the most important ever written by any English poet." A writer in *The Times Literary Supplement*, January 29, 1954, approvingly remarks: "Mr. Auden has suggested that the day may come when Keats's letters—which he sees as Shakespearian in their vigour—will be more widely read and admired than his poetry itself." For the striking change in critical opinion from Patmore and Arnold to Eliot and Auden both the Formans are largely responsible. Their editions abound in good material, and will never be completely superseded.

In addition to many letters from Keats's relatives and friends, the present work includes seven letters or other documents signed or written by Keats that appear in no English edition, and new texts of seven other letters by him (Nos. 62, 64, 127, 232, 235, 237, 239). Furthermore, all the letters known only in Woodhouse's transcripts (Nos. 16, 18, 22, 31, 36, 44, 47, 49, 58, 59, 68, 74, 76, 79, 80, 96, 108, 110, 175, 193) and in Jeffrey's transcripts (Nos. 45, 52, 56, 61, 93, 102, and part of 159) are here printed for the first time exactly as Woodhouse and Jeffrey copied them. This edition, then, will be found to have comparatively little resemblance to any of its predecessors, for not only are most of the texts based upon an independent transcription of the originals, but about half the notes are new, and about sixty of the letters have been redated and rearranged.

No edition of Keats's letters, however, may justifiably be called "complete," for many have not survived or are hidden from

[3] *Keats* (Oxford), p. 202. [4] *Poems of John Keats* (1950), pp. xv f.

the public. In 1934[5] L. A. Holman and J. H. Birss published a brief list of letters here and there referred to but then unknown, and to it a few additions were made by M. B. Forman in his 1935 edition.[6] The following composite list, also no doubt incomplete, cites the volume and page where references will be found to letters written by Keats but apparently not preserved. Actually, too, many of the letters preserved only in transcripts (all of those by Jeffrey and eight by Brown) have "lost" omissions, though I have not listed every one of them below.

1816

To George Keats — August — (I, 109)

Keats wrote "three words" on the lost cover enclosing No.5

1817

To George Keats — Spring — (I, 141)

On May 10, 1817, Keats referred to "my Letters to him," but only one letter to George (No. 21) is now known between August, 1816, and this date. Again in October (I, 169) he mentions "a Letter I wrote to George in the spring," and he may have referred to the letter which Brown (*KC*, II, 56) says he wrote "some time before May 1817 . . . to one of his brothers"

To J. H. Reynolds — September — (I, 151)

Only part of No. 31 is known

To George Keats — *c.* 10 September — (I, 155)
To Charles Cripps — *c.* 22 November — (I, 184)

1818

To Benjamin Bailey — *c.* 3 January

A. E. Newton's sale catalog (New York, 1941), Part II, item 523, lists a letter of Bailey's, January 3, 1818, in which he says, "I wrote Keats just last night." Presumably Keats replied immediately, since in No. 55 he refers only to a letter that Bailey wrote on January 11 [7]

To George and Tom Keats — 31 January — (I, 222)

[5] *NQ*, January 6, 1934, p. 7.
[6] 2nd ed., pp. xiii f.
[7] The same catalog, however, item 521, enumerates "a stamped addressed envelope reading 'Miss B. [*sic*] Barrett 50 Wimpole St,' apparently in Keats, [*sic*] writing"!

1818

To George Keats — *c.* 14 March — (I, 246)

Keats says that he "forgot to tell George" about going to the Teignmouth theater

To George Keats — *c.* 17 March — (I, 247)

George replied on March 18 to a letter telling him about Tom's illness

To George Keats — *c.* 27 April — (I, 274, 283)
To Benjamin Bailey — 27 April — (I, 275)
To William Wordsworth — 27 June — (I, 302 f., 306)
To Tom Keats — 25–27 June — (I, 298)

Only part of No. 91 has been printed

To George Keats — *c.* 1 July — (I, 308)

Keats mentions two letters, one of them No. 92

To C. W. Dilke (?) — *c.* 2 July — (I, 317)

Possibly Keats had sent him a letter with a copy of "Meg Merrilies"

To Richard Abbey — 25 August — (I, 365)
To Fanny Brawne — ?September — (II, 132)

Or in "the very first week I knew you"—whenever that was (see I, 66f.)

To Mrs. C. W. Dilke — 20 September — (I, 369)

To Charles Brown — ?November

Brown told Fanny Brawne on December 17, 1829 (Keats Museum) that in his proposed biography he wished to include a letter from Keats, now unknown but presumably sent to him, which was "written when he dispaired of Tom's recovery"

To "P. Fenbank" — *c.* 11 November — (II, 17)
To C. C. Clarke — *c.* 2 December

See his *Recollections of Writers* (1878), p. 157

To Richard Woodhouse — *c.* 2 December — (I, 409)

Woodhouse is replying to a note (possibly written by Brown) that informed him of Tom Keats's death

To William Haslam — 18 December — (II, 12)
To Charles Brown — 28 December — (II, 18)