

Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. xx + 315, ISBN 0-19-818396-8,

It is easy to find isolated examples of politics in Keats's writing, most notably the melodramatic 'Why were they proud?' lines from 'Isabella', which have often been cited as evidence on Keats's politics. It has always been much harder to build a full profile of Keats as a political and social writer. This may be because critics have traditionally creamed off a small portion of his poetry and prose for privileged attention, and that portion has usually been read as being *apolitical*. The predominant narrative of Keats criticism and biography has concerned itself with a rapid process of maturation, in which literary maturity is usually held to be gained in *inverse* proportion to Keats's engagement with (and dependence on) key external influences. These include his formal education, his surgical training, his interest in politics and society, his involvement with Charles Cowden Clarke, Leigh Hunt and others. Whilst these influences have not all or always been portrayed in a negative light, they have typically been seen as things the poet must grow away from in order to make his contribution to literary history. Thus the mature Keats turns away from the most radical of his contemporaries, diffidently advising Shelley to curb his magnanimity and be more of an artist. Only by freeing himself from the political and social world, it seems, is he able to produce the rarefied sensuousness of 'The Eve of St. Agnes', and the philosophical 'great odes' of 1819. In the last of these, 'To Autumn' (John Creaser has noted), Keats's even puts aside the distractions of his 'paganism' and painterly interests. The most dramatic domestic political event of Keats's lifetime, the Peterloo Massacre, news of which arrived just before the poem was written, is (Jerome McGann argues) completely ignored by it.

The critical emphasis that this account approximates has been pervasive in Keats criticism, and continues to manifest itself in hostility towards political readings of Keats. Nevertheless much recent work has taken a quite different direction, provoked as much as anything by McGann's argument about 'To Autumn', in his essay on 'Keats and the historical method in literary criticism', first published in 1979. Politics and history have crept, then marched back into Keats studies -- as indeed they have elsewhere, and there have been, *inter alia*, a 'forum' on Keats and politics in *Studies in Romanticism* (1986), and a book of essays on Keats and History, edited by Nicholas Roe (1995). The book under review sees the same critic making a serious attempt to synthesise, systematise, and generally take further some of the new information and ideas that this movement has produced. It brings the intellectual and political ferment of Keats's lifetime decisively back into the way we read him. Roe examines and contextualises Keats's formal education, his engagement with history

and the classics, his relationship with Cowden Clarke and Hunt, the politics and rhetoric of the Robin Hood 'Outlaw Lyrics', and Keats's medical training and its implications. The last chapter attempts to re-read the politics of the notorious critical backlash against Keats and the 'Cockney School'. Emboldened, perhaps, by this final skirmish in the territory of Keats's critical enemies, Roe adds as an 'Epilogue' a political re-reading of the mature poetry. A well-researched comparative reading of the language of 'To Autumn' and of radical publications of the time claims that even this most critically de-politicised of Keats's poems has a political content too, and indeed (going for the jackpot) may actually be argued to respond to the Peterloo Massacre, verbally and symbolically if not, as it were, in so many words.

This final argument remains hard to prove (it has been made before, though never so energetically), but the author's right to have it taken seriously has certainly been fully earned by the time we get to this point in the book. Roe has drawn usefully on much of good recent Keats scholarship, but has always revisited the primary sources and managed to squeeze something more from them. At a time when some reviewers have confessed to puzzlement as to the purpose and import of the recent Keats biographies, one has in this book not only a drawing together of many interesting strands and arguments, but also a genuine sense of new information and insight. Others have recognised (to take a few examples) that Keats's education was useful to him as a writer, and that he drew on his medical training in his literary work. Roe's chapters on these subjects take us much further. The tone of sympathetic condescension with which the subject of Keats's education has often been treated has been replaced here by some very positive and exciting insights into the ways it enabled him to draw on the vibrant intellectual energies of dissenting culture. The fascinating story of Keats's medical training is well-told—one shudders at his duties as a surgical 'dresser', mopping up after the ham-fisted surgeon 'Billy' Lucas. But Roe goes beyond the obvious biographical and literary significance to Keats of medicine, in order to uncover the intense political and dissenting culture which surrounded its debates. The influence of Leigh Hunt and his circle, which has almost invariably been discussed by critics in terms of literary 'bad taste', is recovered as a valuable sharing of political and literary ideas and motifs. Here and elsewhere one gets above all a sense of a recovery of (to borrow a pair of terms from E.P. Thompson) the ambience and mentalité in which Keats lived and wrote.

If the quality and direction of this work is good for the study of John Keats, it also offers some valuable lessons to students of John Clare. Among the equivalent topics to those Roe investigates in Keats, there is still a need for serious investigation into Clare's formal education, his reading, his religious and philosophical views, his 'circle' of self-taught friends such as Thomas Inskip, Joseph

Henderson and E.T. Artis, his connections with the *London Magazine* writers, and with contemporary artists. The whole topic of Clare and politics seems currently to be stuck in an entertaining but not very productive Punch-and-Judy argument over whether he was or was not a radical (both positions are easy to ‘prove’). New approaches are urgently needed. Nicholas Roe ends his book with an Appendix of correspondence from the Blackwood Papers in the National Library of Scotland. The last item is a memorandum from Alaric Watts to William Blackwood from c. 1822, which concludes ‘Then there is John Clare about whom there has been so much twaddle...’ Clare scholars might take this as a warning that there is much sorting out still to be done. Roe’s excellent book offers a model for how to do it.

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