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A Draft of the Earliest Known Letter of Keats's Brother Tom

Robert Gittings

ON 17 June 1969, Houghton Library received as the gift of Arthur A. Houghton, Jr., what has been known as "the Severn notebook." At the death of Keats's friend, Joseph Severn, this appears to have passed into the hands of Harry Buxton Forman. It was then in the collection of F. Holland Day, from which it passed to that of Frank J. Hogan, Jr., where it acquired a red-and-gold-lettered morocco case bearing the words "Keats' Note Book" on the spine and "Ex Libris Frank J. Hogan," with motto, on the inside flap. In 1945 it was bought by John F. Fleming. It was sold to Professor C. Ernest Cooke on 20 October 1949, and it was finally repurchased through John F. Fleming at the Parke-Bernet Sale of 4 June 1969.

The notebook was first described, though not entirely accurately, by Harry Buxton Forman¹ in 1883, four years after the death of Joseph Severn, in part of a footnote to Keats's *To My Brother George*.

Among the late Joseph Severn's Keats relics were a few leaves from a small oblong pocket note-book, bearing pencilled sketches by Keats of rude figures &c., and what seem to be the first drafts (in pencil also) of this sonnet² and the two quatrains of the sonnet *To My Brothers*.

Forman, in noting these autograph draft poems by Keats, was only dealing with three out of the eight pages (four sheets) of the whole notebook fragment. He is misleading in suggesting, though he does not admittedly specify exactly, that the remaining pages consist of what he calls, in curious late Victorian terms, "sketches by Keats of rude figures &c." As will be seen, there is only one sketch on only one page; it contains no figures, rude or otherwise. Moreover, there seems no evidence to connect it with Keats. Forman does not mention that the remaining four other pages (two sheets), that is, half the sheets,

¹ *The Poetical Works and Other Writings of John Keats*, London, 1883.

² *To My Brother George*.

consist of handwritings in hands other than that of Keats. As late as 1938, Maurice Buxton Forman merely repeated his father's note.³

A slightly more accurate description, though adding in its turn a number of its own errors and misconceptions, is to be found in the Frank J. Hogan Sale Catalogue, Part Two, Third Session, Wednesday afternoon, April 25th, 1945, No. 431, p. 127. The sale catalogue quotes the Harry Buxton Forman note in full; then adds

These drafts occupy 3pp. of the manuscript. On another is a rough pencil drawing, evidently of a tree and a stone in a graveyard. On another is a quotation entitled "*Hannibal Carracens*," consisting of two lines of Latin. On 2½ pp. is a draft of a letter. This is followed by a half-page list of clothing dated July 24. The portion of the letter which is legible seems to refer to Keats's need of money; it mentions "John" and "George," and sends "my love to Fanny."

This substitutes, though unconvincingly, "a tree and a stone in a graveyard" for the "rude figures &c." It does not note that the hand of the "quotation" is Severn's. Most misleading of all, it assumes that the draft of a letter (actually two drafts) is in the hand of Keats himself, and refers to his own "need of money."

Oddly enough, the hand of the letter-drafts had been identified as Tom Keats's, not John's, twenty years before by Amy Lowell,⁴ who saw it in the collection of F. Holland Day; but she then proceeded to mistranscribe it (the second letter-draft only), making errors in several important points. She even subjected the list of clothing to the same process; some of her readings were unintelligible, but she did not bother to explain them.

The first step toward a correct description of these four loose sheets is to arrange them in their most probable order. This is not difficult, owing to the creases and tears where they have been detached from the stub of the original notebook, which was like a tiny shopping list or memoranda pad, measuring 4 5/8 by 2 5/8 inches. Indented marks on the pages, and the fact that two pages are much more dirty and rubbed than others, suggesting that these were outside pages (1 and 8), together with known dating of the poetry, give the following description of the eight pages:

1. Draft of a letter by Tom Keats.
2. Fair redraft of the same letter.

³ *The Works of John Keats* (New York, 1938), I, 71-72 and 81-82.

⁴ A. Lowell, *John Keats* (Boston and New York, 1925), I, 172-174.

3. (a) Continuation and conclusion of this redraft.
(b) Dated laundry list, also in Tom Keats's hand.
4. The name of a seventeenth-century painter and an inscription of two lines in Latin, both in the hand of Joseph Severn.
5. Artist's rough sketch, apparently of an architectural subject.
6. Autograph of John Keats: draft of octave of sonnet, *To My Brother George*.
7. The same: draft of sestet of the same sonnet.
8. The same: draft of octave only of sonnet, *To My Brothers*.

Both Harry Buxton Forman and H. W. Garrod⁵ noted the variant readings in the drafts of the poems, though not always accurately; while Garrod made the confusing statement that what he designated "S: pencil-draft in Severn pocket-book" was "in Huntington Library," where it has apparently never been.

It is clear from comparison with other manuscripts in the Houghton Library Keats Collection that pages 1, 2, and 3 are in the characteristic handwriting of Tom Keats. Their association in this notebook with the draft poems by his brother makes them constitute by far the earliest letter that we have from Tom. The next⁶ is nearly two years later. Typically, if we may believe other accounts of Tom, the letter is a request for money. Its first draft (page 1) has been very rubbed and is extremely faint, but photography by the Fogg Art Museum has at least produced the following partially clear result (illegible lacunae indicated . . .).

. . . from John . . . he enclosed 5 Pns which I have expended coming . . . be obliged to you for more which George will enclose for me. (I hope your) I hope Mrs & Miss Abbey are well. I beg my respects to Fanny. I am etc.

For all its lacunae, even this faint first draft implies the name of its intended recipient. Since Tom Keats mentions his brothers John and George and his sister Fanny, together with the names of Mrs. and Miss Abbey, the letter is obviously going to be addressed to the one person all these had intimately in common, the Keats children's guardian and trustee, Richard Abbey. This becomes even more clear in the fair-copy redraft (pages 2 and the first half of 3).

⁵ *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, 2nd. ed. (Oxford, 1958), pp. 39 and 43. In his apparatus criticus (p. xvii) Garrod added to the confusion by designating this source as *s*.

⁶ *The Keats Circle*, ed. H. E. Rollins (Cambridge, 1948), I, 21-24. Letter of 17, 18 May 1818 to Marian Jeffrey (really Mary Ann Jeffery).

John sent me 5*l* on the 4th past according to your desire for which I am much obliged — I have only 1*l* remaining & shall soon want more. At your convenience I will thank you to give some to George

for me & he will enclose it. I hope Mrs & Miss Abbey are well. I beg my respects to them & my love to Fanny & remain Etc.

In this version, which was presumably sent more or less as it stands, with a superscription to Abbey added, Tom Keats appears to have become both more businesslike and more tactful. He does not suggest that he has spent all the money, but gives an exact and dated account of his assets and spending; he asks after the health of Abbey's wife and adopted daughter, and sends his respects to them.

What the letter further reveals, correctly transcribed, are two interesting biographical facts about the poet. Tom, it appears, is writing it from somewhere out of London, where he is staying away from his brothers and from his guardian's family. The two poems later in the notebook are known to have been written by Keats at Margate, where he spent some time with Tom in the summer of 1816. It is reasonable to conclude that Tom is staying at Margate, though Keats has not yet joined him there. The remainder of page 3, immediately after the letter-draft, gives the date at the head of what appears to be a laundry-list.⁷

July 24
2 Shirts
4 Cravats
2 Pair Stockgs
1 Pkitt Hankf
1 Flannel Nightst

On 25 July 1816, John Keats attended the Apothecaries Hall, Blackfriars, London, and passed the examination which gave him the Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries. By August he was in Margate. Various accounts, differing in detail, have been made of his presence there with Tom. Tom's draft letter makes clear that Tom was already at the seaside resort when Keats took his examination, that John joined him there sometime after 25 July 1816, and that this letter from Tom Keats to Richard Abbey should be dated between 4 and

⁷ Lowell, *John Keats*, I, 173-174, argued lengthily that this was a *packing-list* of "things to put into a valise." Her statement that Keats and Tom were already together was based on not reading, or misreading the entries which show that the five pounds had been "enclosed" and "sent" by Keats to Tom, implying a separation.

24 July 1816, assuming legitimately that the laundry-list is the next entry in the notebook at a date not long after the final draft of Tom's letter.

The second biographical point that arises is perhaps a little more important in the story of John Keats himself. In the bitter recriminations about the Keats finances, which continued to rage long after the poet's death, George Keats claimed that his brother Tom, and, incidentally, John himself, always spent far in excess of their incomes.⁸ We know that the income of each of the Keats boys at this time should have been 3% of an invested capital of almost exactly £2000 of consolidated stock. The annual income of each boy was therefore £60. In some period between 4 and 24 July 1816, Tom Keats speaks of spending £4 of the income forwarded to him at intervals by his guardian, Abbey. If he spent £4 in 20 days at the maximum — probably a smaller space of time in actual fact — he would be spending between seventy-two and seventy-five pounds a year; in other words, quite considerably in excess of his income. He may, of course, have had unusual expenses at Margate, but he does not plead this excuse in his letter to Abbey, as one would expect if this were so.

The notebook therefore provides the first documentary proof that George's remarks about his brothers' extravagances are likely to be true, especially when it is realized that, with John, even less income was now available, owing to frequent withdrawals from capital to meet the expenses of a medical education and qualification. Tom's newly-acquired letter may help to clinch a vindication of George, which has already grown to be widely accepted.

⁸ *The Keats Circle*, I, 277.

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