**A joy forever**

BY M A H I R A L I 2021-02-24

T HE headstone above a final resting place dug in Rome`s non-Catholic cemetery 200 years ago today bears the indelible inscription: `This grave contains all that was mortal of a young English poet who, on his death bed, in the bitterness of his heart at the malicious power of his enemies, desired these words to be engraven on his tomb stone: `Here lies one whose name was writ in water`.

There is a harp above the inscription, but no name. As some readers might have guessed, the mortal remains are those of John Keats, the bicentenary of whose distressingly premature demise was commemorated yesterday with readings, lectures, virtualtours and thelike. Hisimmortal remains can be found in bookshelves all around the world.

Contrary to what the gravestone suggests, it wasn`t bad reviews that killed the poet.

The villain was tuberculosis, commonly known back then as consumption. After a night out in London in February 1820, Keats coughed up blood and recognised its colour.

`That drop of blood is my death warrant,` he told his housemate. `I must die.

A couple of years earlier, he had watched his younger brother, Tom, succumb to the ailment. As a teenager, he had seen his mother die of the same disease. Besides, he was a qualified apothecary and an apprentice surgeon who eventually chose poetry over medicine, but not before working at Guy`s and St Thomas` hospitals in London.

Orphaned at a tender age, Keats was a belligerentschoolboy,moreinterestedinbrawls than in scholastic pursuits. But he became a voracious reader in his later teens and soon began spouting verse. Hardly any of his juvenile poetry has stood the test of time, although the emotions expressed therein ought to be familiar to men yes, it`s the male gaze, although Keats was later to be commended (or criticised) for his feminine sensibility, too.

T he son net On First Looking into Chapman`s Horner is generally seen as his first significant poem, signalling a lifelong fascination with Greek mythology, which didn`t always serve him well. It was followed not long af terwards by a far lesser known sonnet, Written in Disgust at Vulgar Superstition, an excoriation of organised religion. Some of the early poems also hint at political engagement, but it never came anywhere close to that of his contemporary (and admirer) Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Keats` first volume of verse, published in 1817, may not have been particularly impressive, but it did not deserve the derision it received from a Tory literary establishment almost genetically inclined to be dismissive of `Cockney poets`. The criticism becameeven more vicious when Keats published his first long poem, Endymion; he himself was far from satisfied with this extended excursion into Greek mythology, but had decided that he couldn`t countenance any further revisions.

What`s particularly extraordinary, though, is that his genius wasn`t widely recognised even after he published Lamia, Isabella, The Eve of St Agnes and Other Poems in 1820. The `other poems` included, mind you, some of the most exquisite verses committed to paper in the English language the odes `To a Nightingale`, `On a Grecian Urn` and `To Autumn`, alongside the odes `To Psyche` and `On Melancholy`. The only notable poem that followed was the sonnet Bright Star.

Yet by the mid-19th century Keats was yet to be recognised as a gift to posterity, unlike older contemporaries such as Wordsworth and Coleridge (both of whom he had met).

Perhaps it was only in the 20th century that Keats` stature (he stood 5ft lin) was deservedly elevated to that of a literary giant, buthis star was already shining bright in the late 19th century.

On a visit in 1877 to the cemetery where the poet`s remains are interred, Oscar Wilde prostrated himself upon the grave and declared it to be `the holiest place in Rome`. Hemarked the occasion with a sonnet that includes the lines: `Thy name was writ in water it shall stand/ And tears like mine will keep thy memory green.

The original manuscript can be found in the Keats-Shelley House adjacent to the Spanish Steps in Rome, where Keats grew pallid and spectre-thin and died just months after he arrived in Italy, having survived a tumultuous sea voyage that included quarantine off the coast of Naples because of a cholera outbreak in London.

Keats stepped ashore on his 25th birthday, fully aware that his fears that `I may cease to be/ before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain` were about to come true.

His possible future shall eternally remain a mystery and matter of conjecture. But given his core body of work, it`s hard not to conclude that the opening lines of Endymion would have served as a far more appropriate epitaph than a name `writ in water`: `A thing of beauty is a joy forever: Its loveliness increases; it will never/ Fade into nothingness...` m mahir.dawn@gmail.com