

## JOHN KEATS AS A MEDICAL STUDENT: A PHOTOGRAPHIC ITINERARY

### JOHN KEATS KAO STUDENT MEDICINE: FOTOGRAFSKI PUTOPIS

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#### SUMMARY

*John Keats (1795-1821), besides being the famous English poet, was a student of medicine at the United Hospitals in London. On the occasion of the bicentenary of his death, we would like to pay tribute to this versatile figure with a photographic itinerary of his medical life. This article, in connection with the project "Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database", retraces objects and places where the poet lived, studied, worked, and prematurely died, showing the importance of material culture. The photographic journey starts in London with the birthplace of the poet and continues through the places of his infancy and youth, the school in Enfield, the lodgings at 8 St. Thomas Street, the United Hospitals, etc. After giving up medicine to devote to poetry, the itinerary proceeds in the Hampstead and, as the ultimate destination, in Rome, where John Keats spent his last months of life due to tuberculosis. To conclude the path at the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, where he was buried, surrounded by grass and flowers. The material memories left by John Keats, as well as preserving his memory, take on a significant educational and inspirational role for everybody and, in particular, literary people and medical students.*

**Keywords:** Keats J., cultural heritage, material culture, biography

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## INTRODUCTION

*“That is blood from my mouth. Bring me the candle Brown, and let me see the blood. I know the colour of that blood; it is arterial blood. I cannot be deceived in that colour. That drop of blood is my death warrant. I must die.”*

(Hillas, 1984, pp. 397-398)

It was an evening in February 1820, and these were the words uttered by romantic poet and medical student John Keats to his friend Charles Armitage Brown. He was providing a clear diagnosis and a sure prognosis of his own health condition: he was going to die of tuberculosis exactly a year later, on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1821.

Much has been written about John Keats, his poetry and life, his medical studies and his fatal illness (Goellnicht, 1984; de Almeida, 1991; Roe, 1997). Nonetheless, on the occasion of the bicentenary of his death, we would like to honour his multifaceted personality with a photographic itinerary of his short medical life. Several places related to Keats, as a poet and as a medical student, are still visible today and can be visited. This allows us to preserve his memory and deeds.

This article is mainly based on the project “Himetop - The History of Medicine Topographical Database” [himetop.net](http://himetop.net). Himetop is an open-access web 2.0 database that, since 2007, aims to locate, provide documentary evidence and promote material memories, such as places and monuments related to the history of medicine and healthcare (Borghi, 2018). It contains about more than 2,500 items ranging from anatomical theatres to hospitals, from birthplaces to tombs, from about 39 worldwide countries. The main objective of this database is to encourage the search and discovery of historical and archaeological evidence linked to the medical and health sphere of different geographical zones in order to enhance their educational, cultural and historical value (Borghi, 2017a).

Material culture has an important role. Besides its cultural relevance, it can inspire, motivate and educate students and young professionals in the non-technical aspects of their professions (Borghi 2017a, 2017b), whose relevance has been highlighted even more by the current Covid-19 pandemic.

## CHILDHOOD

John Keats was born in London on the 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1795. His father, Thomas Keats, was the head ostler<sup>1</sup> at the Swan and Hoop livery stables in the district of

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<sup>1</sup> He was basically the livery-stable keeper.

Moorgate, where he met his wife, Frances Jennings, daughter of John and Alice, who ran the Swan and Hoop. John Keats had a sister, Frances Mary, and two brothers, George and Tom; a fourth brother, Edward, died shortly after birth (Hale-White, 1938, p. 8; Smith, 1984, pp. 390-392; Motion, 1997, p. 10).

It appears that the poet was born at the Swan and Hoop (Motion, 1997, p. 10) as suggested by the presence of a plaque which recites: In a house on this site, “The Swan & Hoop”, John Keats, Poet, was born 1795. The birthplace plaque is currently affixed above the sign of the “Keats at the Globe” bar (83 Moorgate).

From 1803 to 1810, John Keats and his brother George were enrolled in John Clarke’s school in Enfield, which at the time was a village on the outskirts of London. Here, Keats formed a long-lasting friendship with the headmaster’s son, Charles Cowden Clarke (Smith, 1984, p. 392; Motion, 1997, p. 23).

Unfortunately, the building which hosted the school-house was demolished in 1872 after becoming a train station in 1849; however, it was possible to save the ornate facade of the building, which was purchased for the Structural Collection of the Science Museum. At present, it is preserved in the storage of the Victoria & Albert Museum, and it is described as follows: “The flat façade is divided into three by four pilasters with Corinthian capitals supporting a cornice; the central division with an opening for a window, the outer two each with a niche, the top which is filled with a cherub’s head and crossed palm branches surmounted by a swag of fruit and leaves. Above the whole cornice is a swallow lunette”<sup>2</sup>.

As said, nowadays, on the old school’s site, there is the modern train station of Enfield Town (Southbury Road) where a plaque has been placed with the following inscription: “The house which stood on this site was built in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Later it was used as a school and John Keats was educated here. In 1849 it became the station house and was demolished in 1872” (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. Memorial plaque placed in the modern train station of Enfield Town (Southbury Road). Photograph courtesy of Julie Bozza (<https://keat-slocations.co.uk/>).

<sup>2</sup> See the official record at Victoria and Albert Museum at: <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O185391/architectural-facade-wren-christopher-sir/> (accessed: 04 February 2021).

During these school years, the life of John Keats was studded with grief: in April 1804, John's father died after falling from his horse. The next year the poet's grandfather died, while in 1808, Midgley John Jennings, Keats' uncle, passed away because of tuberculosis. Furthermore, in 1810 tuberculosis also took away Frances, the young mother of the poet. It was this last loss that most affected John Keats. He was very close to his mother that, during her illness, he was the one who looked after her. The poet was in charge of preparing her meals, administering her medication and reading to her (Smith, 1984, p. 392).

After Frances' death, grandmother Jennings chose two guardians and trustees to help her educate the Keats brothers: John Nowland Sandell and Richard Abbey, being the principal one (Hale-White, 1938, p. 8; Smith, 1984, pp. 392-393; Motion, 1997, p. 43).

Despite an initial interest in literature, young Keats opted for a medical career. This decision seemed to be influenced by Abbey's will or, according to other researchers, it began during the course of his mother's illness, when Keats began nursing her (Lord Evans of Hungershall, 1969, p. 7; Motion, 1997, pp. 45-46).

### FIRST STEPS IN HIS MEDICAL CAREER

After completing preliminary schooling, John Keats started his apprenticeship under Thomas Hammond, a surgeon from a medical family in Edmonton (Motion, 1997, p. 48). During the apprenticeship, the youngster accompanied Hammond on his rounds, taking notes on cases, cleaning and sweeping the surgery and helping with different standard procedures, such as leeching, blistering, cupping, and poulticing. Gradually, he started to deepen his medical training, concocting potions and pills under the supervision of Hammond. He learned how to identify symptoms and how to perform medical and minor surgical procedures (e.g., how to bleed and vaccinate, pull teeth, deliver babies, etc.) as well as attend post-mortem examinations (Motion, 1997, p. 50).

Unfortunately, information about this period of medical training is scarce. It is known that Keats was an apprentice from 1810/1811<sup>3</sup> to 1815. After that, in October 1815, he joined the United Hospitals, which included St Thomas's and Guy's Hospitals in central London (Lord Evans of Hunger-

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<sup>3</sup> Sources about the start date of the apprenticeship are conflicting. Lord Evans of Hungershall (1969, p. 7), de Almeida (1991, p. 24) and Motion (1997, p. 48) indicate the date 1810, on the contrary, Hale-White (1938, 9) indicates the date 1811. Roe (2012, pp. 47-48) affirms that Keats never finished his apprenticeship.



Figure 2. John Keats' statue in the Guy's Hospital. Photographs by Luca Borghi for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database ([himetop.net](http://himetop.net)).

shall, 1969, p. 7; Smith, 1984, pp. 393-394). Since 2007, it has been possible to admire a life-size bronze statue in an old London Bridge alcove in the East quadrangle of Guy's House, which represents John Keats seated with a book in his hand. The statue was realised by Stuart Williamson, who was inspired by paintings, drawings and the life mask of Keats, made by Benjamin Robert Haydon four years before the poet's death (Motion, 1997, p. 566; Mathews, 2009, p. 98). Sculptor Stuart Williamson declared: "I wanted the statue to represent Keats as realistically as possible, debunking the myth that portrays him as a passive creature of the senses and reflecting his often radical and robust nature. The sculpture is meant to show Keats in a contemplative mood, as if perhaps in a moment of reflection or composition." (London Set Community, 2007) (Fig. 2).

At the St Thomas's and Guy's Hospitals, Keats attended lectures in the practice of medicine, chemistry, midwifery, anatomy, physiology, surgery, medical botany, theory of medicine, materia medica, morbid anatomy, and dissection (Banerjee, 1989, p. 620; De Almeida, 1991, p. 24). At the Keats House Museum in Hampstead (see below), a small pocket-sized notebook is preserved, bound in brown leather, where the poet used to take his medical notes. This notebook reveals a student - as often happens - more interested in some topics than others: some notes are written neatly, while others are sketchy and surrounded by scribbles of skulls, flowers, and fruits (Motion, 1997, pp. 79-80). (Fig. 3)



Figure 3. John Keats' medical notebook. Photograph by Luca Borghi for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database ([himetop.net](http://himetop.net)).

Keats lived in lodgings near the hospital with other fellow students: George Cooper, Frederick Tyrrel, George Wilson MacKereth, and Henry Stephens (Scarlett, 1963, pp. 538-539; Motion, 1997, p. 74). The latter appears to have helped Keats to produce the first line of the poem *Endymion*, published in 1818 (Smith, 1995, p. 51; Motion, 1997, p. 162). The lodgings that Keats and Stephens shared from 1815 to 1816 are visible even now at 8 St. Thomas Street (London). The building bears a blue plaque placed by the Guy's and St Thomas' Charities Foundation, commemorating their shared lodgings while studying at Guy's and St. Thomas' Hospitals (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Memorial blue plaque visible at 8 St. Thomas Street (London). Photograph by Luca Borghi for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database ([himetop.net](http://himetop.net)).

Astley Paston Cooper (1768-1841)<sup>4</sup>, one of the great founders of modern surgery, taught at United Hospitals and took a liking to Keats (Lord Evans of Hungershall, 1969, p. 8; Smith, 1984, p. 394).

A variety of operating theatres began opening one after the other in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century in the United Hospitals. The only one left is the *Old Operating Theatre* in the attic of St. Thomas' Church, where, perhaps, Keats attended some lectures by Cooper and other professors (McInnes, 1990, pp. 82-86).

Today, it is still possible to visit the *Old Operating Theatre*, the only surviving building of the original complex of St. Thomas' Hospital. After the demolition of the old hospital in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century to make room for the London Bridge railway station, the old theatre in the attic was forgotten and remained undisturbed for about 100 years. It was rediscovered only in 1956 and restored during the 1960s (Fig. 5).



Figure 5. Old Operating Theatre of St. Thomas' Hospital. Photographs by Luca Borghi for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database ([himetop.net](http://himetop.net)), courtesy of “The Old Operating Theatre Museum and Herb Garret’s curator.

Keats was not lucky enough to continue his training under the influence of Astley Cooper. In 1816, he became a dresser to William Lucas, who was considered a “cack-handed butcher” (Motion, 1997, p. 93)<sup>5</sup>. Often the dressers had to deal with the complications and negative side effects from their operations (Banerjee, 1989, p. 621). During this period, the poet suffered from depression, and it is thought that he also started to develop some doubts about becoming a surgeon, probably because of the horrors of surgery of that pre-anaesthetic and pre-antiseptic era, or the fear of performing like Lucas

<sup>4</sup> Other information about this character in Motion (1997), 83-86.

<sup>5</sup> See: Wilks & Bettany, 1892, pp. 133-134.



and to make fatal errors (Lord Evans of Hungershall, 1969, p. 8; Smith, 1984, p. 394; Motion, 1997, p. 94).

Keats was torn: on the one side, his interest in literature was growing. On the other, he was uncomfortable at Guy's and worried about the money spent on his education. However, he could not abandon either medicine or poetry, so he opted for the middle course. He fulfilled the minimum requirements of apprenticeship, lecture attendance, and hospital work to the point that on the 25<sup>th</sup> July 1816, he was examined by the Court of Examiners of the Society of Apothecaries and became a Licentiate of the Society of Apothecaries (LSA), which allowed him to practice medicine (Smith, 1984, p. 394; De Almeida, 1991, p. 25; Motion, 1997, pp. 97-98). Today the Apothecaries' Hall in Black Friars Lane can be visited on request or virtually in order to admire some of the best-preserved 17<sup>th</sup>-century hall interiors, but also portraits and the Society's apothecaries' drug jars and pill tiles<sup>6</sup> (Fig. 6).



Figure 6. The entrance of the Apothecaries' Hall. Photograph courtesy of Adrian Thomas.

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<sup>6</sup> See: <https://apothecarieshall.com/virtual-tour/> (accessed: 04 February 2021).



After examinations, Keats went to the seaside town of Margate for the holidays, where he had the opportunity to think about his future. In late September 1816, he returned to London, worked for a while as an assistant to Lucas and then made up his mind: to abandon medicine for dedication to poetry, much to Richard Abbey's discontent (Scarlett, 1963, pp. 539-540; Lord Evans of Hungershall, 1969, p. 9; Smith, 1984, p. 396; Banerjee, 1989, p. 621; Motion, 1997, pp. 130-131).

### THE ROMANTIC DISEASE AGAIN

At the beginning of 1817, John Keats found himself face to face with the "romantic disease", which struck his brother Tom this time. Again, it was tuberculosis: John took care of his brother, who unfortunately died on the 1<sup>st</sup> December 1818 (Smith, 1984, p. 396).

After Tom's death, the poet moved to "Wentworth Place" in Hampstead with his friend Charles Armitage Brown. The building hosted two homes: the western house was occupied by Charles Wentworth Dilke and his family, and the eastern one by Brown and Keats. From 1819 the western house was occupied by the Brawne family: Mrs Brawne and her daughter Fanny, aged 19, with whom the poet fell in love.

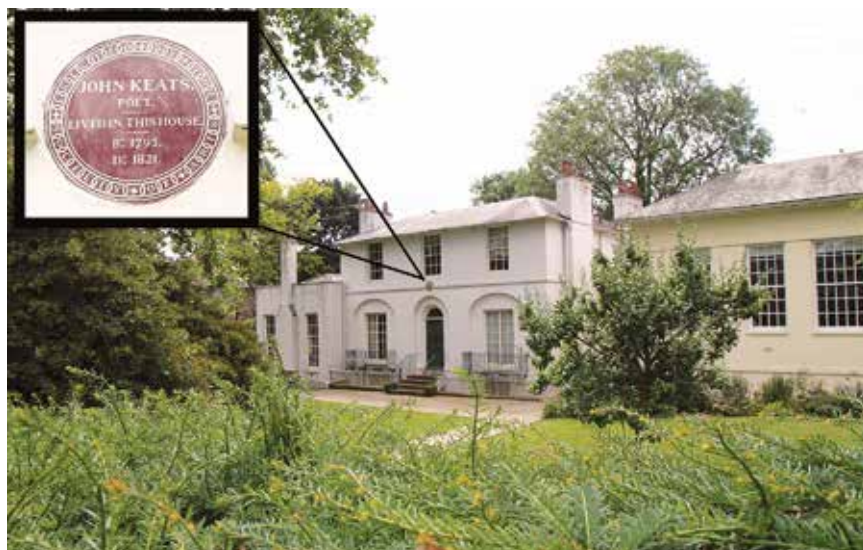


Figure 7. "Keats House" in Hampstead. In the box, the rounded, claret plaque. Photograph by Luca Borghi for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database (himetop.net), courtesy of Keats House.

John Keats lived in Hampstead from December 1818 to September 1820, when he left to travel to Rome. In that house, he wrote some of his most important poems, such as ‘La Belle Dame sans Merci’ and ‘Ode to a Nightingale’.

Nowadays, the house hosts a museum, the “Keats House”, where it is possible to visit Keats’ bedroom, the different rooms of the house where the poet lived, and many objects related to his life (Smith, 1984, pp. 396-398). Outside the house, a rounded, claret plaque is present, which reads: “John Keats, poet, lived in this house. B: 1795. D: 1821” (Fig. 7).

Keats had been worried about his health for some time. Nonetheless, he had resisted the idea of being sick with tuberculosis, perhaps also to protect himself and his friends from that perspective. His situation worsened after a tour of Scotland, during which he visited the grave of the poet Robert Burns (1759-1796). The mainly walking trip and the climate were critical to his already fragile health (Motion, 1997, p. 273).

Eventually, in February 1820, he started to show unquestionable signs of the disease; progressive phthisis, which required periods of forced rest, bleeding, and starvation (Motion, 1997, p. 497).

The two physicians in charge of the poet recommended him to spend the winter in Italy in order to avoid the rigid English temperatures that could have killed him (Motion, 1997, p. 525). Rome was chosen because of its mild climate and the good medical care available. However, the forced departure to Italy made Keats very nervous: he did not want to leave his beloved Fanny! (Smith, 1984, pp. 398-399; Motion, 1997, pp. 525-527).

The journey was organised, and the painter Joseph Severn (1793-1879) was chosen as Keats’ companion (Motion, 1997, p. 533).

## THE STAY IN ROME

The two friends climbed on board the brigantine *Maria Crowther* and left London on 17<sup>th</sup> September 1820 (Hale-White, 1938, p. 60; Motion, 1997, pp. 537-538). After several misfortunes, such as storms, contrary winds, and quarantine in the port of Naples due to an epidemic of typhus in London when the brigantine set sail, they arrived in Rome on 15<sup>th</sup> November. They stayed in a hundred-year-old house in Piazza di Spagna (now number 26) at the bottom of the Spanish steps, which lead up to the church of Trinità dei Monti (Motion, 1997, pp. 540-544). The physician James Clark (1788-1870) (Borghi, 2021), who specialised in “pulmonary consumption” and was interested in

the effects of climate on consumption, took care of Keats and found them a second-floor apartment, where the poet and the painter spent four months and where Keats eventually died (Smith, 1984, pp. 398-400).

The residence is currently a museum with a library, named Keats-Shelley House and supported by the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association. The museum is dedicated to the British Romantic poets related to Rome. The building still hosts Keats' bedroom, as well as some treasures and curiosities of the Romantic poets (Payling, 2005, pp. 83-107; Stephens & Watkins, 2006, p. 3).

It is also possible to admire a faithful reconstruction of Keats' deathbed since the original bed and all the furniture were burnt for fear of contagion (Motion, 1997, p. 567) (Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Left: exterior of the “Keats-Shelley House”. Right: reconstruction of Keats' deathbed. Photographs by Jessica Casaccia and Enrica Vinciguerra for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database (himetop.net), courtesy of Keats-Shelley House.

Outside the house, there are two plaques in memory of the poet. The rectangular one, above the entrance door, reads as follows: “Keats Shelley Memorial House / acquired and dedicated to the memory / of the two poets by their admirers / in England and in America”. The quadrangular one, on the side of the building facing the staircase, is decorated with the drawing of a lyre and presents a brief inscription in Italian and in English: “L'inglese poeta Giovanni Keats / mente maravigliosa quanto precoce / morì in questa casa / li 24 febbraio 1821 / ventesimosesto dell'età sua. / The young English poet / John Keats / died in this house / on the 24<sup>th</sup> February 1821 / aged 25” (Fig. 9).



Figure 9. Left: the rectangular memorial plaque. Right: the quadrangular plaque. Photographs by Luca Borghi for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database (himetop.net).

The last days in Rome were bestrewn with episodes of hemoptysis, fever, and delirium until his death occurred on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1821 in the arms of his friend Severn (Smith, 1984, pp. 399-401). The day after, Dr Clark requested to make a cast of one of Keats' hands and feet and of his face<sup>7</sup>. At the "Keats-Shelley House", it is possible to see one of a series of white plaster casts of the poet's death mask made by Charles Smith, where "the cheekbones are skeletally clear, the nose beaky, the eyes sunk in their sockets, the receding hair pressed thinly back" (Motion, 1997, p. 566).

Not being a Roman Catholic, John Keats was buried in the *parte antica* of the Protestant Cemetery of Rome (Via Caio Cesto, 6). Keats seemed enthusiastic about his burial site, as reported by Severn: "He expressed pleasure at my description of the locality of the Pyramid of Caius Cestius, about the grass and the many flowers, particularly the innumerable violets, also about herds of goat and sheep and a young shepherd - all these intensely interested him. Violets were his favourite flowers, and he joyed to hear how they overspread the graves. He assured me that he already seemed to feel the flowers growing over him" (Motion, 1997, p. 564).

Even today, the Protestant Cemetery looks like a place out of time: it was described by Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) in his elegy "Adonais" (1821) as "an open space among the ruins, covered in winter with violets and daisies. It might make one in love with death, to think that one should be buried in so sweet a place" (Ratcliffe, 2016). In this delightful place, it is still possible

<sup>7</sup> According to Motion (1997, p. 566), the cast was accomplished by Gherardi, the mask-maker of Antonio Canova. However, this information is uncertain (see: Malone, 2012, p. 126-128).

to admire the tomb of the poet. The headstone inscription is compositional: John Keats desired an engraved broken lyre and the words: “Here lies One / Whose Name was writ in Water” and the inscription in the middle was conceived by his friend Brown: “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” (Beck-Friis, 1956, p. 9; Scarlett, 1963, p. 535; Motion, 1997, pp. 564-565) (Fig. 10).



Figure 10. Gravestones of Keats and Severn in the Protestant Cemetery of Rome. Photograph by Giovanna Failla for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database ([himetop.net](http://himetop.net)).

Nearby there is a memorial tablet dedicated to the poet, it was realised and offered by the sculptor Mr Warrington Wood, and it was inaugurated in 1876. It is placed on the boundary wall of the Cemetery and represents Keats' portrait and English verses:



K-eats! If thy cherished name be 'writ in water'  
E-ach drop has fallen from some mourner's cheek;  
A-sacred tribute: such as heroes seek,  
T-hough oft in vain - for dazzling deeds of slaughter  
S-leep on! Not honoured less for Epitaph so meek! (Fig. 11).



Figure 11. Memorial tablet dedicated to John Keats in the Protestant Cemetery of Rome. Photograph by Luca Borghi for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database (himetop.net).

## CONCLUSION

Despite the meekness and humility of Keats' own dictated epitaph, his memory lasts forever as much as a poet and an emblematic figure in the long struggle of medicine against tuberculosis. The material steps he left in England and Italy, which we tried to follow along this photographic itinerary, can still be of inspiration for literary people, medical students and professionals, for everybody.

Some of the most important places of the poet's life, associated in particular with the part of his life devoted to medicine, have been described with the purpose of highlighting the importance of material culture in preserving memory and honouring Keats' life on the occasion of the bicentenary of his death.

Thanks to associations and institutions which safeguarded and gave value to all these locations through the constitution of museums and the realisation of memorial plaques, it is possible to revive this important character of English literature, but also to take inspiration from his life and to learn.

“Material things influence our needs and define our aspirations; they express our ideas, encode value and convey messages” (Hannan & Longair, 2017, p. 183).

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## SAŽETAK

Osım što je slavni engleski pjesnik, John Keats (1795. – 1821.) bio je i student medicine na londonskom sveučilištu. Fotografskim putopisom njegova medicinskog života želimo odati počast ovome svestranom čovjeku u povodu dvjestote obljetnice njegove smrti. Ovaj članak, u suradnji s projektom Himetop – topografska baza podataka povijesti medicine (eng. Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database) pokazuje važnost materijalne kulture prateći objekte i mjesta na kojima je pjesnik živio, studirao, radio i prerano umro. Ovo fotografsko putovanje počinje u Londonu, njegovu rodnome mjestu, i nastavlja put kroz mjesta njegova djetinjstva i mladosti – škola u Enfieldu, prebivalište na broju 8 Ulice St. Thomas, Ujedinjene bolnice itd. Nakon što je odustao od medicine kako bi se posvetio poeziji, putopis se nastavlja u Hampsteadu i vodi do Rima gdje je John Keats, zbog tuberkuloze, proveo posljednje mjeseci svoga života. Putovanje završava na protestantskom groblju u Rimu gdje je pokopan okružen travom i cvijećem. Materijalne uspomene koje je ostavio, osim što čuvaju uspomenu na njega, imaju značajnu obrazovnu i inspirativnu ulogu za sve, a posebice za ljude koji se bave književnošću i studente medicine.

**Ključne riječi:** John Keats, kulturalno nasljeđe, materijalno nasljeđe, biografija