

A brand-new stethoscope for John Keats

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Abstract. The bicentenary of John Keats' death is approaching (February 2021) and it deserves a celebration both in the literary and in the medical world. Keats spent his last months in Rome looking for relief from the disease that was killing him: tuberculosis. The physician who took him in charge was the then young Sir James Clark (1788-1870) who, during a stay in Paris in 1819, had become an early and strong supporter of Laennec's stethoscope. He surely brought some version of it to Rome and most probably used it to auscultate Keats' lungs. That was not sufficient to prevent the young poet's death, occurred in February 1821. Nonetheless, Keats became an unaware and unfortunate instrument to that first diagnostic step forward in the titanic medical struggle against "consumption". As Clark stated in 1820, defending the stethoscope from critics: "To know the nature and extent of a disease is surely the first step in our progress to the adoption of rational means of cure".

Key words: tuberculosis; stethoscope; Rome; John Keats; James Clark

Dear Editor,

Romantic poet and medical student John Keats (1795-1821) arrived in Rome two hundred years ago, in mid-November 1820, looking for relief from the disease that was killing him: tuberculosis. Due to his ongoing medical education, he had no illusion about the possibility of full recovery. In February of that same year, after a first haemoptysis, he confided to his room-mate Charles Brown: "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" (1). Nonetheless, he accepted the invitation of physicians and friends and moved to the Eternal City, whose mild climate was thought to be helpful in cases of consumption.

Probably, neither Keats nor his friend Joseph Severn, the young artist who accompanied and nursed him during his last months (2), knew anything about a recent invention that was going to deliver a first fatal blow against the dreadful disease: the stethoscope. Laennec had invented his momentous "tube" in 1816, but only after three years of careful diagnostic

investigations with it, did he feel confident enough to announce the good news to the medical world in his *Traité de l'Auscultation Médiante* (Paris, August 1819).

In Italy, in 1820, very few had heard of "Laennec's tube" and virtually no one was using it. Some Italian physicians at that time tried using it without proper training, and finding the tube too complex or uncertain quickly put it aside (3). But there was an exception and it was very close to Keats.

Dr. James Clark (1788-1870), a Scottish physician in his early thirties living in Rome, was engaged prior to Keats's arrival there to take him on as a patient and find lodgings for him and Severn. Clark lived in *Piazza di Spagna* and found rooms there for Keats and Severn opposite his own place in a building at the bottom of the famous staircase to the Church of *Trinità dei Monti*. Much has been written and criticized about Clark's unfortunate medical prescriptions: regular bleeding, starvation diet and... piano playing! (But who could have done better in those times?)

A new detail about Clark's diagnostic skills can be added to the story. On his way to Rome, in June 1819,

Clark spent a few weeks in Paris. Although Laennec was on leave due to health problems, he became familiar with the stethoscope with the help of Laennec's replacement at Necker Hospital, Jean Bruno Cayol. Clark, the future physician of Queen Victoria and confidant of Florence Nightingale, became a strong supporter of the stethoscope and surely brought some version of it to Rome and most probably used it to auscultate Keats' lungs.

That was not sufficient to prevent the young poet from living a sort of "posthumous existence" – as he described it – during his last days. Diagnosis essentially differs from cure, but it is a necessary step towards it. James Clark was well aware of this when he defended the stethoscope from those criticizing it as a useless instrument providing superfluous information: "To know the nature and extent of a disease is surely the first step in our progress to the adoption of rational means of cure" (4).

Keats was an unaware and unfortunate instrument to that *first step* in the long and titanic medical struggle against tuberculosis. And this is one more reason to remember him on the bicentennial from his death (Fig. 1).

References

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Figure 1. John Keats' tomb, Protestant Cemetery, Rome (photo by Giovanna Failla for Himetop – The History of Medicine Topographical Database, CC BY-SA 3.0)

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