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Nicholas Stanley-Price

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ARTICLE



The Grave of John Keats Revisited

Nicholas Stanley-Price

Advisory Committee, Non-Catholic Cemetery for Foreigners, Rome

ABSTRACT

Many visitors in the nineteenth century to the grave of John Keats in Rome thought it 'neglected' or 'solitary' and 'unshaded'. Today's critics often characterize the grave as 'marginal', both literally and metaphorically, while ignoring the city authorities' proposal to demolish it in the 1880s. An analysis of the grave's original setting and its subsequent renovations suggests instead that it enjoyed a privileged position. Historical descriptions, when considered together with visitors' accounts – a valuable source if used critically – and little-known artists' depictions of Keats's grave prompt a re-assessment of ideas of its 'marginality' and 'neglect' in the nineteenth century.


KEYWORDS

John Keats; Rome;
Protestant cemetery; poet's
grave; Percy Bysshe Shelley;
Joseph Severn; Romantics

The grave lies quite alone, and is evidently
much neglected. (William Porter Ray, 1853)

It's shocking to see that one of the great poets
of the modern Western world has a grave so small,
so simple, and so (apparently) shunted to the periphery
of the property. (Jeffrey C. Robinson, 1998)¹

Visitors during the nineteenth century to the grave of John Keats often commented on its marginal or solitary position in a corner of the old Protestant cemetery in Rome. Many described it as 'neglected', a criticism sometimes made also of the grave of Percy Bysshe Shelley in the adjacent new cemetery.² Some sought a connection between the condition of the graves, as they perceived it, and the literary reputations of their occupants. Seeing Keats's grave, Theodore Witmer concluded that 'in death as in life he seemed an object of neglect', and his fellow-American Samuel Cox, standing at Shelley's grave, wondered whether 'this apparent neglect springs from prejudice against the young sceptic Shelley'.³ The word 'neglect' is commonly found in descriptions of Keats's grave during the nineteenth century. It provoked controversy again in the 1950s when the New York *Herald Tribune* published a letter reporting on 'the utter desolation' the writer had found on a recent pilgrimage to Keats's grave. The entire old cemetery was 'in shocking neglect', an allegation that was carefully rebutted by the president of the Keats-Shelley Association of America, Ruth Draper, supported by

CONTACT Nicholas Stanley-Price  nstanleyprice@tiscali.it

¹Ray, 'The Graves of Shelley and Keats,' *Graham's Magazine* 42, no. 5 (May 1853): 542–3; and Robinson, *Reception and Poetics in Keats: 'my ended poet'* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 48.

²Nicholas Stanley-Price, 'Shelley's grave revisited,' *The Keats-Shelley Journal* 65 (2016): 53–69.

³Witmer, *Wild Oats, Sown Abroad* (Philadelphia, 1853), 135 (year of visit from internal evidence was 1850); Cox, *A Buckeye Abroad* (Columbus, 1860), 148 (year of visit 1851).

Gustav Davidson, secretary of the Poetry Society of America, on the basis of their recent, separate, visits to the site.⁴

Earlier visitors' accounts are a valuable source for assessing the significance attributed to poets' graves.⁵ Current literature on the reception of poets has drawn on such sources in documenting the apparent marginality of the grave of Keats. I argue here, however, that nineteenth-century and modern authors have usually misunderstood important contextual information about Keats's place of burial.⁶ Nor do modern authors consider what was surely the most critical moment for assessing the significance of Keats's grave, namely the city of Rome's proposal in the 1880s to demolish it. Opposition to this plan, which remained on the agenda for many years, led to the intervention of European heads of state, an indication of the reputation of Keats in the late nineteenth century.⁷

By drawing on the cemetery's history, visitors' accounts and artists' depictions, I aim to provide a historical context for the Grave.⁸ I first review the relative interest in it shown by visitors to Rome soon after the death of Keats. I then comment on the need to assess visitors' accounts critically when evaluating their charges of 'neglect' of the Grave. At the close of the nineteenth century, the continuing threat of demolition co-existed with various modifications made to its setting, changes that are documented in little-known contemporary images. These well-intentioned efforts also led to renewed complaints.

The Poet's Grave in the First Twenty Years

The Grave soon became an object of pilgrimage for those who knew the poet's work or Shelley's *Adonais* and its 'slope of green access'. Other than Joseph Severn, Edward Trelawny must have been among the first to visit it after his arrival in Rome in March 1823. Keats's friend Charles Wentworth Dilke visited with his son Charles in 1826.⁹ Arthur Hallam was at the graveside in 1827, the year in which it was also mentioned in a published feature about the Protestant burial-ground.¹⁰ Three years

⁴Mabel A.E. Steele, 'Keats's Grave,' *The Keats-Shelley Journal* 5 (Winter, 1956): 7–9.

⁵Samantha Matthews, *Poetical Remains. Poets' Graves, Bodies, and Books in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); idem, 'Making their mark: writing the Poet's grave,' in *Literary Tourism and Nineteenth-Century Culture*, ed. N.J. Watson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 25–36.

⁶For example, Keats's grave has been considered 'marginal' for lying in a foreign, Protestant cemetery beyond the city's 'Catholic' walls: Alison Chapman, 'The aura of place: poetic form and the Protestant Cemetery in Rome,' in *Travel Writing, Visual Culture and Form, 1760–1900*, ed. Brian H. Murray and Mary Henes (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 140; idem, 'The allure of Keats's grave,' <http://web.uvic.ca/~vicpoet/2011/05/the-allure-of-keatss-grave/#sthash.CtfftrN.dpuf> (accessed October 10, 2018). But the cemetery is *inside* the city-walls (which long pre-date Catholicism). For inferences about Keats's 'marginality', partly derived from a similarly false premise, see also Andrew Motion, *Keats* (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), 567.

⁷A period, however, when some critics were re-assessing that reputation following publication in 1878 of his love-letters to Fanny Brawne. Grant F. Scott, 'Writing Keats's Last Days: Severn, Sharp and Romantic Biography,' *Studies in Romanticism* 42, no. 1 (2003): 9–12.

⁸I use the capitalized form 'Grave' to denote the grave of Keats.

⁹Dilke, *The Papers of a Critic, Selected from the Writings of the Late Charles Wentworth Dilke*, vol. 1 (London, 1875), 17.

¹⁰Martin Blockside, 'A Life Lived Quickly': *Tennyson's Friend Arthur Hallam and His Legend* (Brighton, Sussex: Academic Press, 2011), 66. Hallam arrived in Rome on 5 November 1827; 'Protestant Burial-ground at Rome,' *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* 10, 285 (December 1, 1827): 371. J.D. Sinclair, *An autumn in Italy ... in 1827* (London, 1829), 247, is presumably also referring to Keats's grave.

later Richard Chenevix Trench, a future Dean of Westminster, met Joseph Severn in Rome and made a 'pilgrimage' (his word) to the graves of Keats and Shelley.¹¹

This evidence of early pilgrimage must be seen in perspective, however. Other well-educated British residents or visitors to Rome were unaware of the poet's presence or his death. The few mourners present at his funeral¹² did not include Lord Colchester who was in Rome on that date, and had met Severn who may have explained why he was in the city;¹³ nor Valentine Llanos who had visited Keats's sick-bed three days before he died.¹⁴ The elderly bibliographer and genealogist, Egerton Brydges, was also in Rome but he did not know Keats nor hear of his death while there.¹⁵

Two weeks after the poet's death, Frances Waddington (wife of the Prussian diplomat, C.C.J. Bunsen) witnessed the burial of her cousin William Pendrell Waddington at a distance of only ten metres from Keats's grave (Figure 1).¹⁶ So too did Selina Martin who was back at the burial-ground in August for Walter Synnot's burial.¹⁷ Neither discloses any knowledge of Keats's grave nearby. Frances Bunsen returned in July 1821 to bury her daughter Maria, and in late June 1823 to bury an infant son, both of them interred next to Waddington.¹⁸ By June 1823 Keats's headstone had finally been erected but Bunsen makes no mention of the bright new grave-marker nearby. Nor did the English writer, Henry Digby Beste, who surely knew Keats's name and who visited the cemetery. The headstone with no name left other visitors mystified. Nathaniel Hazelton Carter, an American professor at Dartmouth College, observed that 'Near the gate rests an anonymous English poet, whose epitaph complains of persecution', and Harriet Morton, a governess, commented of her visit to the cemetery that 'One poor poet complains, that his name is written in water.'¹⁹ This negative evidence hints at the relative obscurity of Keats's name among educated travellers in that first decade.

During the 1830s, however, the graves of Keats and Shelley feature regularly in the accounts of British and American visitors.²⁰ From 1843 the indispensable Murray's *Handbook* made them better known. The Protestant burial-ground was 'one of those objects which travellers of all classes and of all tastes will regard with melancholy interest', and the graves of John Keats and Percy Bysshe Shelley were among those of note.²¹ Tourists' reactions to the poets' graves ranged from deep awe through mixed emotions to a perfunctory acknowledgement (a few visitors' accounts omit any mention

¹¹Trench, *Letters and Memorials*, vol. 1 (London, 1888), 51–2.

¹²Joseph Severn to John Taylor, March 6, 1821, in *Joseph Severn. Letters and Memories*, ed. Grant F. Scott (Ashgate 2005), 139; and Sue Brown, *Joseph Severn, a Life: the Rewards of Friendship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 110.

¹³Lord Colchester, *Diary and Correspondence of Lord Colchester*, vol. 3 (London: Murray, 1861), 192–204; and Severn, 'My tedious life,' in Scott, *Joseph Severn*, 645.

¹⁴Daniel Griffin, *The Life of Gerald Griffin Esq. by his Brother* (London, 1843), 146–7.

¹⁵Brydges, *Recollections of Foreign Travel*, vol. 1 (London, 1825), 71–2.

¹⁶Augustus J.C. Hare, ed., *The Life and Letters of Frances Baroness Bunsen*, vol. 1 (New York, 1879), 167.

¹⁷Selina Martin, *Narrative of a Three Years' Residence in Italy, 1819–1822*, 2nd ed. (Dublin, 1831), 265–6 (Waddington is unnamed but is the only candidate; see *Gentleman's Magazine* 91, no. 1 (April 1821): 378; *ibid.*, 341.

¹⁸Frances Waddington Bunsen, *A Memoir of Baron Bunsen*, vol. 1 (London, 1868), 185; and Hare, *Life and letters*, 201–2.

¹⁹Beste, *Italy as it is; or, a Narrative of an English Family's Residence for Three Years in that Country* (London, 1828), 435; Carter, *Letters from Europe*, vol. 2 (New York, 1827), 343–4; and Morton, *Protestant vigils, or evening records of a journey in Italy in the years 1826 and 1827*, vol. 1 (London, 1829), 155.

²⁰E.g. William Bell Scott, *Memoir of David Scott, R.S.A.* (Edinburgh, 1850), 102 (year of visit 1833); Henry T. Tuckerman, *Italian Sketch Book* (Boston, 1837), 48–50 (years of visit 1833–34); *The Mirror of Literature, Amusement and Instruction* 34 (1834): 320 and 394–5; and Nathaniel P. Willis, *Pencilings by the way*, vol.1 (London, 1835), 201.

²¹[Octavian Bluiitt], *Handbook for Travellers in Central Italy*, 1st ed. (London: Murray, 1843), 464.

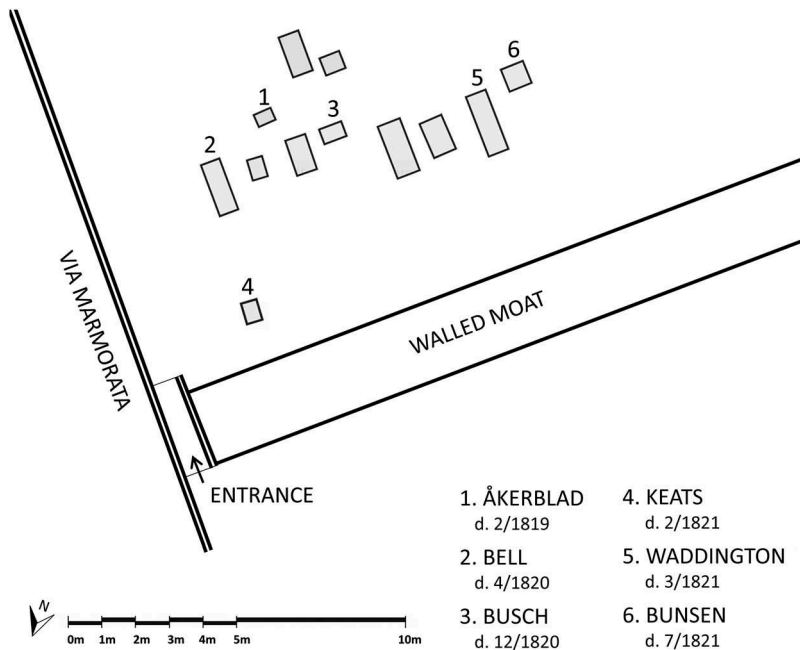


Figure 1. The immediate context of the grave of John Keats in 1824. Dimensions of the moat and entrance are approximate.

of them.) The mixed emotions stemmed from feelings of reverence for the poets' last resting-places mitigated by disappointment at their modest settings and poor condition.

The Burial Place of John Keats

John Keats was buried on 26 February 1821 in what was known as the 'English' burial-ground that had been in use for more than 100 years.²² It lay inside the ancient city-walls, a short carriage-ride from the city centre. Regulations governed by health considerations required that the transport of all corpses, whether Catholic, Jewish or Protestant, took place at night. There was no discrimination against Protestants in this respect and, in fact, by the 1820s these rules were being applied less strictly to Protestants. The funeral and burial of Keats took place around 9.00 am on a Monday morning, a time possibly agreed with the city authorities so that the cortège could avoid the crowds participating in Carnival festivities.²³ Six weeks earlier the same authorities had granted permission for a morning burial of the young Anny Synnot so that her elderly father could attend; and in July 1821 Mary Bunsen went to her grave two hours before sunset.²⁴

²²Nicholas Stanley-Price, Mary K. McGuigan and John F. McGuigan Jr., *At the Foot of the Pyramid: 300 Years of the Cemetery for Foreigners in Rome* (Rome: Edizioni Askl, Casa di Goethe/Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, 2016); Nicholas Stanley-Price, *The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome. Its History, its People and its Survival for 300 Years* (Rome: The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome, 2014); Wolfgang Krogel, *All'ombra della piramide: Storia e interpretazione del cimitero acattolico di Roma* (Rome: Unione internazionale degli istituti di archeologia, storia e storia dell'arte in Roma, 1995); and Antonio Menniti Ippolito, *Il Cimitero acattolico di Roma. La presenza protestante nella città del papa* (Viella, 2014).

²³Brown, *Joseph Severn*, 110.

²⁴Martin, *Narrative*, 260; Bunsen, *A Memoir*, 185. On nocturnal funerals, see Nicholas Stanley-Price, 'The myth of Catholic prejudice against Protestant funerals in eighteenth-century Rome,' *Analecta Romana Instituti Danici (ARID)*, 42 (2017): 89–100. http://www.acdan.it/analecta/analecta_42.htm (accessed October 10, 2018).

The cemetery lay in the Meadows of the Roman People, common land that was grazed and browsed by sheep and goats and partly given over to the cultivation of mulberry trees. The unenclosed area containing burials, located in front of the pyramidal monumental tomb of Gaius Cestius (1st century BC), had gradually extended further into the meadows. New burials were marked by wooden crosses. If family or friends were present or travelled to Rome for the purpose, they commissioned a stone marker to replace the cross. The layout of the extant stone monuments can appear today to be haphazard, but many of them are loosely aligned in rows running perpendicular to the pyramid.²⁵ The most evident alignment is a row of eight gravestones, with that of John Bell (d. 15 April 1820) on the left and that of Mary Bunsen (d. 22 July 1821, mentioned earlier), on the right (Figure 1). It is striking that the grave of Keats started a new row instead of extending the existing row (as Waddington's burial did two months later). Joseph Severn had recently visited the cemetery at Keats's request, and may have deliberately selected this plot set apart.

After Keats's death British sculptors in Rome offered to help Severn with a gravestone²⁶ – Richard Westmacott and William Ewing had both attended Keats's funeral, and John Gibson would have been another candidate. But the months went by as negotiations dragged on over the wording of the epitaph and the design of the lyre motif. Further delay resulted when Severn decided to entrust the task of carving to the young sculptor Joseph Gott,²⁷ whose family from July 1822 was sharing his house. But Gott went down with a bad attack of fever. His recovery after six months' illness around December 1822 coincides with Severn's reports that 'I had just given directions about poor Keats Grave Stone' and then, on 23 January 1823, that he hoped it would be finished that week.²⁸ But it was not. In March, in his request for official permission to erect the stone, Severn explained that the death had occurred two years earlier. In April he was still at work with Gott.²⁹ The stone was finally erected in late May or early June 1823.³⁰

By then, the cemetery had been closed to further burials. For several years the papal Secretary of State, Cardinal Consalvi, had been negotiating with the resident legates of Hanover, Prussia and Russia who wished to protect the 'foreigners' cemetery' by enclosing it. Concerned at the physical and visual impact of the Protestants' monuments, Consalvi first directed where future graves should be made and then, in October 1821, he prohibited all further burials there, allocating land for a new cemetery to the west (Figure 2).³¹ Burial in the 'old' cemetery ended in August 1822. By then, the new row of graves started for Keats had not been added to. But his grave was hardly 'solitary': the group of earlier graves behind the poet's

²⁵Sebastian P.Q. Rahtz, J. Dunk and J. Giorgi, 'The monuments of the Parte Antica,' in *The Protestant Cemetery in Rome: the 'parte antica'*, ed. A. Menniti Ippolito and P. Vian (Rome: Unione internazionale degli istituti di archeologia, storia e storia dell'arte in Roma, 1989), 172, fig. 2c, on a detail of which Figure 1 here is based.

²⁶Severn to William Haslam, May 5, 1821, in Scott, *Joseph Severn*, 156.

²⁷As concluded also by Grant F. Scott and Sue Brown (eds), 'New letters from Charles Brown to Joseph Severn', citing Brown to Severn February 7, 1823, 1823, note 4, *Romantic Circles* (2007) <https://www.rc.umd.edu/editions/brownsevern/letters/7feb1823.html> (accessed September 3, 2018).

²⁸On his fever, Gott to Sir Thomas Lawrence, November 3, 1822; Pietro Camuccini to Sir Thomas Lawrence, February 5, 1823, both in Terry Friedman and Timothy Stevens, *Joseph Gott 1786–1860 Sculptor* (Leeds, 1972), 58; on progress, Severn to Charles Brown, 7 December 1822, 21 January 1823, and 9 April 1823, in Scott, *Joseph Severn*, 219, 228 and 238. Gott died in 1860 and was buried in the Protestant Cemetery.

²⁹Edward Trelawny to Joseph Severn, April 24, 1823, in Harry Nelson Gay, 'The Protestant Burial-Ground in Rome: A Historical Sketch,' *Bulletin and Review of the Keats–Shelley Memorial, Rome*, 2 (1913): 46–7. Gay also quotes the permit approving its erection, dated March 8, 1823.

³⁰Severn to William Haslam, June 1, 1823 but postmarked June 10, 1823, in Scott, *Joseph Severn*, 242.

³¹Krogel, *All'ombra*, chap. V; Stanley-Price, *Non-Catholic Cemetery*, 26–35 and ill. 26, a census map of 1829, on which Figure 2 here is based.

included those of such distinguished figures as J.D. Åkerblad (1763–1819), the Swedish diplomat and philologist, John Bell (1762–1820), the Scottish anatomist and author, and Johann Jürgen Busch (1758–1820), the German sculptor (Figure 1). Percy Bysshe and Mary Shelley's little boy, William, lay a little further away. At that time the markers on all these adjacent graves were flat ledgers lying at grass-level.³² For this reason, Keats's headstone, at a little over one metre high, stood out prominently in the open meadows.

Its prominence was further enhanced when Cardinal Consalvi acceded to the ambassadors' longstanding request for enclosure. At the time of Keats's funeral, visitors had to push through a 'low, briery hedge' to reach the burial-ground.³³ In its place, it was agreed to have not a high wall but a dry moat, a solution that was aesthetically acceptable to Consalvi while also a physical barrier to animals and people. The first ditch to be dug filled up as its sides collapsed.³⁴ Its successor was the extremely robust stone-lined moat, apparently more than two metres deep, that survived in places until the 1950s (Figure 2). Its stone sides extended above-ground as low walls (Figure 3).³⁵ Work on this massive construction project was completed by late 1824.³⁶ The dry moat ran around three sides of the burial-ground, the fourth side already bounded by the wall running along Via Marmorata. In order to enclose as little as necessary of the common land for a cemetery that was no longer in use, the moat was excavated very close to Keats's grave, leaving a gap between Grave and moat wall of around two metres. The sole access to the cemetery was adjacent to the Grave, in the form of a roofed bridge over the moat, built abutting the Via Marmorata wall (Figures 1 and 2).³⁷ But to see the Grave the visitor had no need to enter the burial-ground:

He [Keats] lies in the old, neglected quarter, which is still surrounded by an impassable ditch, and can only be entered at one point. The idea of fortifying a grave-yard is new to me. I did not go in, as his tomb stood near the edge of the fosse, and I could easily read the inscription from without.³⁸

The grave of Keats therefore enjoyed a privileged and not a 'marginal' position: it stood in its own row with no neighbours to either side; it was easily visible from outside the moat; and, for those who did enter the burial-ground, it was the first grave to be encountered, a distinction not lost on visitors.³⁹ Access to the burial-ground required asking the custodian at the New Cemetery to come and unlock the iron gate at the roofed bridge entrance. If the custodian was not available, at least the poet's grave – the principal point of interest in the Old Cemetery for most visitors – could still be viewed clearly across the moat. This changed access helps to explain a shift in artists' depictions of the Old Cemetery after 1822. Thenceforth

³²In 1824 Bunsen had small marble headstones added to the graves of Åkerblad and Busch; *Colburn's New Monthly Magazine and Humorist* 18 (May 1, 1826): 204–5. The large cross on John Bell's grave was not erected until 1891. Figure 3 shows the front row of flat ledgers, with the small Busch headstone, extending to the right of Keats's grave.

³³Theodore Dwight, *A Journal of a Tour of Italy in 1821* (New York, 1824), 338. Dwight happened to visit the day that Keats died.

³⁴Richard Rothe, 'Account of the Protestant worship at Rome,' *The Congregational Magazine* 1, no. 10 (1825), 554.

³⁵For other early images of the moat, see Stanley-Price et al., *At the Foot of the Pyramid*, 17, 25 and cat. no. 17.

³⁶Bunsen, *A memoir*, vol. 1, 241; and Krogel, *All'ombra*, 154.

³⁷Pictured in the *Illustrated London News* 11 March 1876: 253 and reproduced in Stanley-Price, *Non-Catholic Cemetery*, 64, ill. 50. Visible on the left in Figures 3, 7 and 8 here, the blocked entrance survives today.

³⁸Witmer, *Wild oats*, 135. He visited in 1850.

³⁹E.g. Willis, *Pencilings*, 201; Ray, 'The Graves,' 542; and Algernon and Ellen Gissing, ed., *Letters of George Gissing* (London: Constable, 1970), 249.

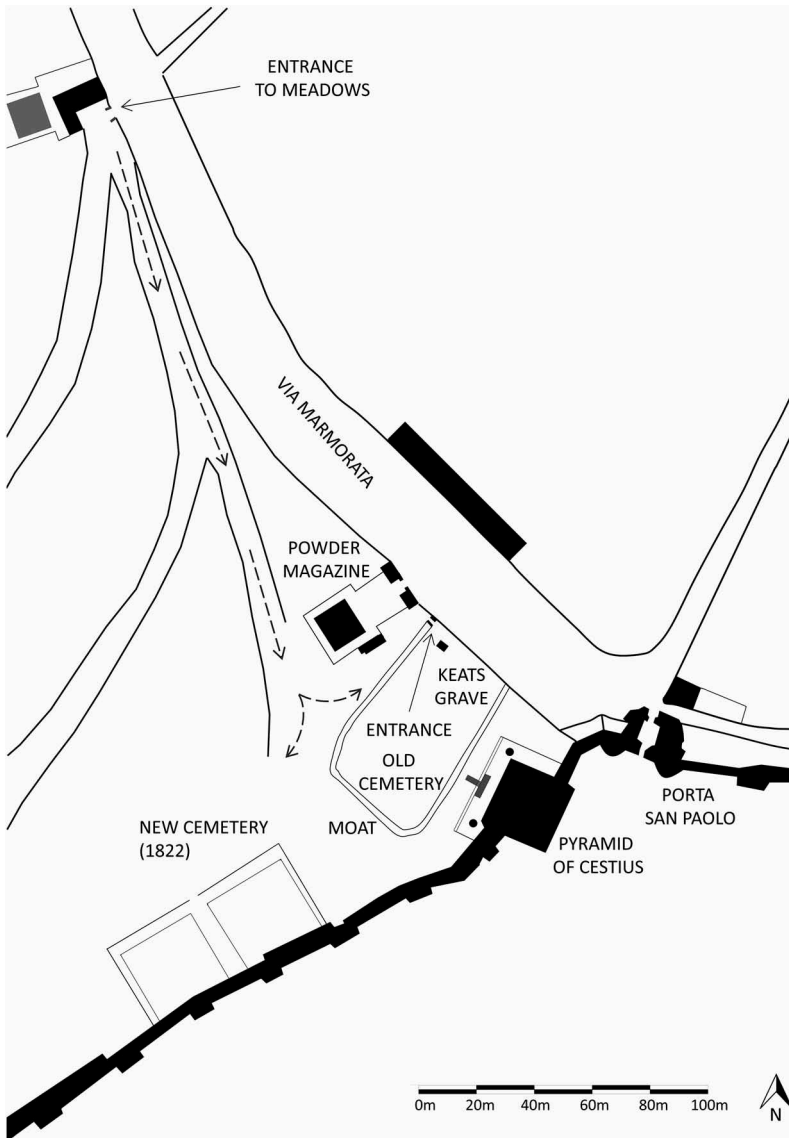


Figure 2. Access to the Protestant cemeteries in Testaccio before 1870.

most views were taken, without bothering the custodian, from outside the moat (which was often shown in the foreground), and depicted the Protestant tombs with the pyramid behind.⁴⁰ Early photographers such as Robert Macpherson (Figure 3) and Roberto Rive adopted this position. So too did the young French artist Antoine-Edmond Joinville in 1824, in what has recently been recognized to be the earliest depiction (by chance) of Keats's grave; David Scott for his well-known sketch of

⁴⁰The 'classic view' from the west and also from the north: e.g. Stanley-Price et al., *At the Foot of the Pyramid*, cat. nos. 15 and 19, for example.

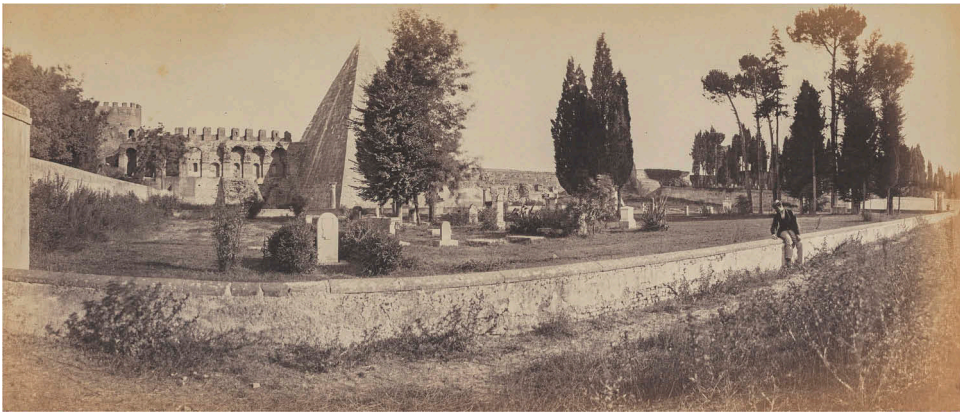


Figure 3. Robert Macpherson, *The Protestant Cemetery at Testaccio*, c. 1864, albumen photograph (McGuigan Collection).

1832; and John Linton Chapman for his painting of thirty years later (Figure 4).⁴¹ Among the views made inside the enclosure, two are of individual monuments⁴² while the etching of 1853 by Carl Ferdinand Sprosse unusually looks towards the New Cemetery, ignoring the pyramid, with Keats's grave visible on the right.⁴³

The Variability of Eyewitness Accounts

If the Grave, as I have argued, was in fact in a privileged position, why did some visitors consider it 'marginal'? Visitors to the Protestant cemeteries (the Old and the New) entered the Meadows of the Roman People at a distant gate in Via Marmorata and headed in their carriages along a track towards the entrance-gate of the New Cemetery (Figure 2).⁴⁴ Those wishing to visit the Grave without contacting the custodian could turn left onto a path that, running between the powder magazine and the walled moat, ended at the Via Marmorata wall. Finding the Grave along a path that ended in a cul-de-sac and a locked gate could result in disillusion. But most visitors felt a mounting sense of excitement as their path through the meadow culminated in a fine view of the Young English Poet's monument.⁴⁵

Inevitably, different visitors had different reactions, subject to numerous variables including their own expectations, their previous knowledge, their present company, and the time of year and day. For example, perceptions varied about the burial mound on Keats's grave.

⁴¹Elania Pieragostini and Nicholas Stanley-Price, 'The earliest visual record of the grave of John Keats,' *The Burlington Magazine* 161 (March 2019): 224–7; Scott's drawing in R. Ingpen ed., *The Letters of Percy Bysshe Shelley*, vol. 2 (London: Sir I. Pitman, 1909), opp. 690, reproduced in Stanley-Price et al., *At the Foot of the Pyramid*, 25; *ibid.*, cat. no. 36 for Chapman's painting. For the dating of Macpherson's photograph in Figure 3, see John F. McGuigan Jr and Nicholas Stanley-Price, 'Four albumen photographs of the Cemetery by the Scottish photographer Robert Macpherson, 1864,' *Newsletter, Friends of the Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome* 43 (Summer 2018): 3–4.

⁴²Martin, *Narrative*, frontispiece (Anny Synnot's monument) and Augustus J.C. Hare, *Story of my Life*, vol. 3 (London: George Allen, 1900), 518 (grave of Augustus W. Hare). The squat Hare pedestal-monument is visible, centre foreground, in Figure 3 here.

⁴³Reproduced in Wolfgang Krogel, 'Der Alte Friedhof der Nicht-Katholiken in Rom und seine Umgebung. Ein Szenarium in Wandel,' in Menniti Ippolito and Vian, *Protestant cemetery*, Abb. 39a.

⁴⁴*Central Italy and Rome*, 2nd ed. (Coblenz: Karl Baedeker, 1869), 190.

⁴⁵Mena C. Pflishing, *Memories of Italian Shores* (Chicago, 1895), 79; and CMR, 'Three graves in Italy,' *New York Times*, May 6, 1899.

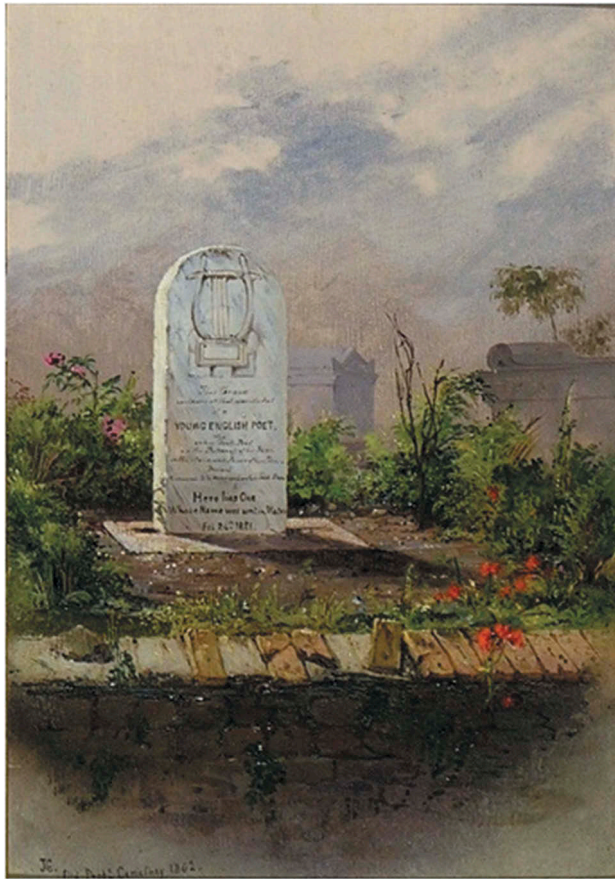


Figure 4. John Linton Chapman, *Tomb of Shelley and Tomb of Keats*, 1862, oil on board, Jean and Graham Devoe Williford Charitable Trust (WP106) (detail of Keats's grave).

The 'sunken mound' seen by Cox in 1851 was confirmed by Ray in 1853 who noted that, thanks to the winter's rain and the 'sacrilegious feet of travelers', the mound had subsided to the original level of the ground. But five years later Sophia Hawthorne found that 'the hillock over the body is still rounded'.⁴⁶ In another example, the grave of William Shelley, buried in 1819, was for one visitor 'very near' to the Grave but, for another, it was '[a]t the extreme margin of the ground, and at a considerable distance from the grave of Keats'.⁴⁷

The delight of a visitor at a first encounter could, on a repeat visit some time later, turn to disillusion at the apparent decline of the place. On his first visit William Dean Howells appreciated the sunken mound of 'our beloved poet', the quaintly lettered simple stone and the roses and sweet-smelling bushes growing on the Grave. On his return visit forty years later, however, he reported that 'the dust of Keats lies in an old, plain, almost neglected corner, well off beyond a dividing trench' and only a few withered daisies lay on the Grave.⁴⁸

⁴⁶Cox, *A Buck-eye Abroad*, 149; Ray, 'The Graves,' 542; and Hawthorne, *Notes in England and Italy* (New York, 1869), 282.

⁴⁷*The Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* 24 (July/December 1834): 320; Ray, 'The Graves,' 542–3. The actual distance between the two graves is thirty-five paces.

⁴⁸Howells, *Italian journeys* (New York, 1867), 168; idem, *Roman holidays and others* (New York, 1908), 142.

The frequent discrepancies among different visitors' reactions were exemplified again in the exchanges in the New York *Herald Tribune* in 1955. Draper acknowledged that 'the grass is not often cut and wild flowers grow. To some people this part of the cemetery may seem neglected, but to others it has a serene charm.' Davidson had found no noticeable neglect on his visit the previous summer. 'Moreover, he said he would not want to come upon Keats' grave – or the grave of any poet long dead – in a "manicured" condition, all shined up for visitors.'⁴⁹ Such preconceptions have always influenced individual opinions, and have contributed to the charges of 'neglect'.

The 'neglect' of Keats's Grave

For most visitors, the experience of seeing the poet's grave was sufficiently overwhelming to obviate any need for description, although some alluded to the flowering roses, poppies or daisies growing around it. But others were disappointed. Critical comments on the state of the Grave started in the mid-1830s. The commonest complaints were of the long grass in which it stood⁵⁰ and the lack of trees or bushes for the poet's shade.⁵¹ Those who expected the closely cropped green sward and the overhanging yews of an English or American churchyard had difficulty in appreciating Keats's grave.

The long grass in the old burial-ground was a direct result of its enclosure with the dry moat. The sheep and goats that grazed and browsed the commons had now been excluded. Unless a custodian regularly and laboriously scythed the grass in between the tombs, the ground vegetation enjoyed a natural annual cycle of winter growth and summer die-off. Photographs from the end of the century show haystacks among the tombs, indicating good use of the natural grass growth. But in earlier decades nature seems to have taken its course. For the custodian, care of the New Cemetery, actively in use by the foreign community, had priority over the old burial-ground. The care of individual tombs depended on relatives or friends either resident in Rome or making occasional visits to Italy. For Keats's grave, Severn made explicit his sense of responsibility when, proposing in 1836 a more grandiose monument to replace the stone with the inscription that was an 'eye sore' to him, he wrote: 'I have the right as Keats last friend, and also as an Artist in the management [of the grave]'.⁵² Nothing came of his proposal before he left for England, nor of his renewed enthusiasm, twenty years later when about to return to Rome, for installing a substantial monument to Keats on the Grave.⁵³ It was while Severn was absent in England that the American art

⁴⁹Steele, 'Keats's grave.'

⁵⁰Willis, *Pencilings*, 204; J.T. Headley, *Letters from Italy*, rev. ed. (New York, 1848), 145 (year of visit 1843); Ray, 'The graves of Shelley and Keats,' 542; Newman Hall, *The Land of the Forum and the Vatican* (London, 1854), 412; *The Poetical Works of John Keats, with a Memoir by Richard Monckton Milnes* (London, 1854), xxxvii. On earlier visits to Rome in 1832–5, Milnes surprisingly made no mention of the Grave: T. Wemyss Reid, *The Life, Letters and Friendships of Richard Monckton Milnes*, vol. 1 (London, 1890), 121–55.

⁵¹Grace Greenwood, *Haps and mishaps of a tour in Europe* (Boston, 1854), 186: 'a bare and shadowless place...not a tree to shelter a bird over his lonely rest'; Cox, *A Buck-eye Abroad*, 149: 'No trees shade the small upright marble'; J.W. Cross, ed., *George Eliot's Life, as related in her letters and journals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 140: 'unshaded by wall or trees'.

⁵²Severn to Charles Brown, July 13, 1836, in Scott, *Joseph Severn*, 338.

⁵³Severn to Charles Dilke, February 3, [1859], in Scott, *Joseph Severn*, 468–9. The American sculptor William Henry Rinehart (1825–1874) had had similar plans just before his own death; James E. Freeman, *Gatherings from an Artist's Portfolio* (New York, 1877), 283.

historian, Charles E. Norton, had the gravestone re-set and violets and myrtles planted around it. Norton felt that the air of neglect was inappropriate in the Protestant cemetery while also suspecting that natural regeneration might be preferable.⁵⁴ During her own time in Rome in 1861, Keats's sister, Fanny de Llanos, added a bay laurel tree either side of the Grave⁵⁵ even though, as Severn learned from the cemetery custodian, Giovanni Trucchi, any nearby bush or flowers suffered severely from souvenir-hunters.⁵⁶ The custodian planted some young box bushes around the plot to deter visitors from approaching the stone. Together with a rose-bush and some poppies, the box bushes appear in Chapman's painting of 1862 (Figure 4). By 1866 the Grave was said to be 'shut in almost, by evergreen and starred with flowers' and, soon after, a party of English visitors, finding it 'overgrown with weeds', raised money to improve it.⁵⁷

Once Italy was united and Rome its capital, concern at the state of the Grave led to its first comprehensive renovation since the poet's death. Severn's proposal to add to the grave marker a more substantial monument, perhaps a bronze bust of Keats, found little favour. The simple little headstone, with its inscription that many regretted, was now part of history and should not be changed.⁵⁸ The renovation work of 1875 followed a donation sent from England by Mary Frere who on her visit in 1867 had found the Grave 'sadly neglected'.⁵⁹ In correspondence with her brother James in Boston and with Keats's niece, Emma Speed, in Kentucky, Sarah Clarke – resident at the time in Rome – described the state of the Grave and the steps taken to improve it. Clarke saw to the work in co-operation with Sir Vincent Eyre. They had the stone, its bottom-edge previously almost flush with the ground (Figures 3 and 4), raised on a new stone pedestal 0.3m high and surrounded the Grave area with a stone kerb. The letters of the inscription, twice re-cut in the past, were again almost illegible in places⁶⁰ and were now infilled with hot lead as a more durable solution. As for planting, Clarke reported, the box hedge, two myrtles (the ones planted by Norton) and rosebushes were all in good order – Eyre had urged that the box hedges be retained so as to deter souvenir-hunters. As Miss Frere had requested, they now planted violets on the grave area, and behind the Grave, a young stone pine.

Another report on this renovation work referred to the two young bay laurels (i.e. Fanny de Llanos's) and the two myrtles (i.e. Norton's) already growing there, and illustrated the renovated tomb (Figure 5).⁶¹ The watercolours painted within a few months of each other in

⁵⁴*Letters of Charles Eliot Norton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1913), 144, n.1: 'Bill of expense for putting in order the grave of Keats. Rome, January 1856'.

⁵⁵Brown, *Joseph Severn*, 284.

⁵⁶In response, Severn encouraged him to 'sow & plant double as much'. Severn, 'On the adversities of Keats' fame,' in Scott, *Joseph Severn*, 622.

⁵⁷William Smith, *A Yorkshireman's Trip to Rome in 1866* (London, 1868), 143; and Anon, 'The last fall of Rome,' *The London Journal: And Weekly Record of Literature, Science, and Art* 52 (1870): 280.

⁵⁸Howells, *Italian Journeys*, 145; Sarah J. Clarke, 'Restoring Keats's grave. Some hitherto unpublished letters on the subject,' *Boston Evening Transcript*, July 17, 1907; Brown, *Joseph Severn*, 324–6 and fig. 16 for one of Severn's proposals for a statue of Keats.

⁵⁹Clarke, 'Restoring'; Brown, *Joseph Severn*, 324.

⁶⁰William Evill, *A Winter Journey to Rome and Back* (London, 1870), 84: 'this inscription – roughly and most unskillfully cut into the stone, as though by the hand of a journeyman mason.'

⁶¹'The grave of Keats,' *Illustrated London News*, August 28, 1875, 214. In this woodcut, the magazine's artist, probably working from a sketch sent from Rome, has 'restored' also the strings of the lyre that were shown deliberately as incomplete on Keats's headstone.

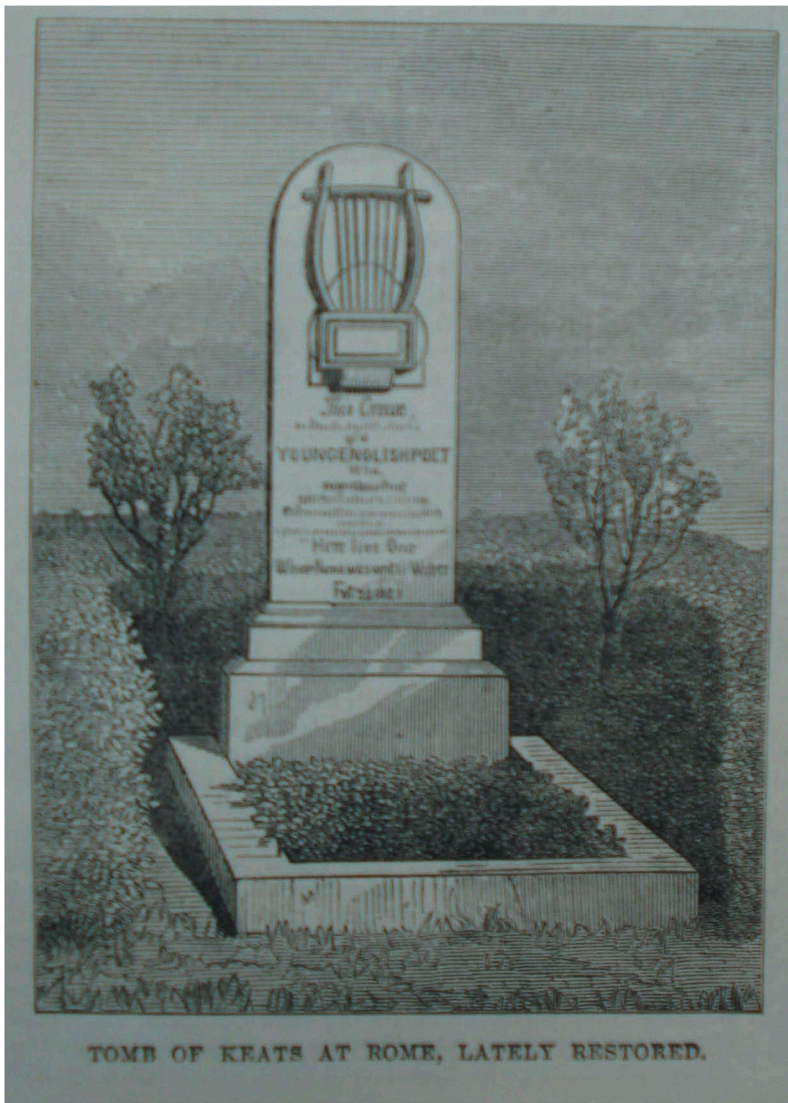


Figure 5. Tomb of Keats at Rome, lately restored, *Illustrated London News* 28 August 1875.

1873 by William Bell Scott and Walter Crane depict it prior to renovation, while George Howard's must post-date it in showing the headstone raised on its new base, a hint of the kerbstone at the front, and the bay laurels a little taller than in Crane's depiction.⁶²

⁶²Stanley-Price et al., *At the Foot of the Pyramid*, cat. nos. 37, 38 and 39; also Colin Harrison and Christopher Newall, *The Pre-Raphaelites and Italy* (Oxford: Ashmolean, 2010), cat. nos. 91, 93 and 107. Scott's watercolour is in the Keats House Collection at London Metropolitan Archives (K/PZ/01/185), and is signed 'AB [monogram] from W.B.S. Rome./1873' (my thanks to Kenneth Page at Keats House for alerting me to this and to Scott's 1873 watercolour of Percy Bysshe Shelley's grave in the same collection.) 'AB' was probably Alice Boyd who donated the finished oil of the subject to the Ashmolean Museum (WA 1893.3). Another watercolour dated 1873 by Scott of 'Keat's [sic] Grave in Rome' is at Wightwick Manor (National Trust NT 1288124), its frame enclosing a pressed box leaf from the Grave. <http://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1288124>.

Eyre used money left over from Frere's donation to give substance to Severn's wish for a more artistic memorial to Keats. The sculptor Warrington Wood donated his time to produce a portrait medallion of the poet, and the cemetery custodian, Achille 'John' Trucchi who had succeeded his father Giovanni, contributed the additional masonry necessary for installing the heavy medallion on the wall of the roofed bridge entrance (Figure 7).⁶³ Joseph Severn, by now an elderly man of 82, could not attend the unveiling ceremony but sent a letter to be read.

The renovation work on the Grave undertaken in 1875 put an end to complaints of neglect. For visitors not sure who was the 'Young English Poet', Eyre's acrostic below the portrait provided the clue in its own inadequate way.⁶⁴ All doubt should have vanished six years later with the transfer to Keats's side of the body of Joseph Severn⁶⁵ whose epitaph included the name of John Keats in letters as large as his own. Thenceforth, instead of Keats's 'solitary' stone, there were three grave markers to be seen, those of Keats and Severn and of the latter's infant son, Arthur, killed in a household accident in 1837.

How was this possible if the Old Cemetery had been closed to further burials in 1822? The city authorities enforced the rules strictly but were sympathetic in making the rare exception. They allowed the transfer of Severn's body from the New Cemetery because of his own merits and his personal relationship with the poet. But in the sixty years between 1822 and Joseph Severn's transfer in 1882, only five other burials in the Old Cemetery are known, namely Frederick Bunsen (d. 1823), Mary Garden and Augustus W. Hare (both d. 1834), Mary Abeken (d. 1836) and lastly Arthur Severn in 1837.⁶⁶ C.C.J. Bunsen, the long-term Prussian legate in Rome, had evidently used his influence to secure three of these exceptions: his own infant son Frederick (buried with his sister Mary, mentioned earlier), Augustus W. Hare (friend of the family, whose nephew Augustus later published Baroness Bunsen's diaries), and Mary Abeken (born Hutchings Thompson) who had married his chaplain, Heinrich Abeken. Either Bunsen or John Freeborn, the British consul, would have secured permission for their friend Joseph Severn to bury Arthur in the Old Cemetery.⁶⁷

Burial permits did not specify where the grave should be; this was for the family and the custodian to determine. Interestingly, the Hare grave-monument of 1834 was raised next to the Bunsen one, continuing the line to the right of Waddington (Figures 1 and 3). But Arthur Severn was buried one row back, to the right of Keats's grave. Leaving Rome during a serious cholera outbreak immediately after Arthur's death, Severn never erected a gravestone to his infant son. The grave remained identified only with the usual wooden cross and its burial registration number, in his case 44 (Figure 6). It was entirely expected, therefore, that his remains would be found when excavating a grave for his father.⁶⁸

⁶³The memorial of Keats at Rome,' *Illustrated London News*, March 11, 1876, 253, 283; 'The grave of Keats,' *New York Times*, March 19, 1876 (from *Daily News*, London, February 22, 1876); and Grace Greenwood, 'The medallion of the poet Keats,' *New York Times*, April 30, 1876.

⁶⁴Oscar Wilde, 'The tomb of Keats,' *Irish Monthly*, July 1877, 478, n.1, called it 'a marble libel'; and Greenwood, 'The medallion', noted its 'shocking bad taste'.

⁶⁵Brown, *Joseph Severn*, 340–4.

⁶⁶Rahz et al., 'The monuments,' 208, Table 9.

⁶⁷Freeborn's request three years earlier to have Mary Garden buried in the Old Cemetery was turned down by the city authorities but was approved by the papacy, causing controversy; Krogel, *All'ombra*, 170–2. Significantly, these exceptions ended with Bunsen's departure from Rome in 1838.

⁶⁸As reported in *The Times*, February 16, 1882.



Figure 6. The graves of John Keats and (r) no. 44 (Arthur Severn) (detail of [Figure 3](#)).



Figure 7. Alessandro Vasari, *Cimitero dei Protestanti – Tomba del Poeta John Keats*, albumen photograph from glass negative (Rome, Istituto centrale per la grafica) (by kind permission of the Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e del Turismo).

Arthur was re-buried at the foot but to the side of his father's grave, outside the new box hedge. Marking it was a small, freshly carved headstone, its inscription recording that the poet Wordsworth had attended his baptism in Rome.

The Threat of Destruction Averted

When the two Severn gravestones were erected next to the Grave in 1882, an impending disaster faced the cemetery, although few knew it at the time. As part of the new capital's much needed modern development, the Roman municipality wished to improve the transport connections between the districts of Testaccio inside and Ostiense outside the walls. A master plan (*Piano Regolatore*) of 1883, modifying an earlier one of 1873, foresaw the development of Testaccio for workers' housing and industrial use. The city recommended that a new road and tram-line should run directly from Via Marmorata across the meadows and through a breach to be made in the ancient city-wall. The municipality's planners knew that the foreigners' old burial-ground had long been disused and that their current one (the New Cemetery) badly needed more space. They therefore proposed that, in exchange for demolishing the Old Cemetery, they would provide land for an extension to the New one. The foreign ambassadors, anxious to have the cemetery extended, raised no objection. The British ambassador, J.G. Kennedy, had his support for the plan approved by the Foreign Minister in London, Lord Salisbury. However, an urgent appeal made to Queen Victoria, for which the British diplomat Rennell Rodd was entitled to claim credit, led to her informing Lord Salisbury how deeply she would regret any interference with the poet's grave. The official British position in Rome had promptly to be reversed. Salisbury instructed his envoy there that he 'would be unable to give any sanction, on behalf of her Majesty, to a measure which would be extremely repulsive to the feelings of a large number of Englishmen.'⁶⁹

There followed a flurry of diplomatic activity by Britain and Germany, consolidated during visits to Rome in 1888 by Kaiser Wilhelm II and by the German foreign minister, Herbert Bismarck, who urged that 'British sentiment' towards the poet Keats should be respected and his grave not disturbed.⁷⁰ A compromise was reached with the mayor of Rome: the graves of Keats and Severn would be preserved in a little triangular garden lying between the Via Marmorata and the new traffic route; all the other tombs would be transferred to the promised extension to the New Cemetery.⁷¹ In the meantime, in anticipation of the passage of the new road and tram-line, a stretch thirty metres long of the ancient Roman city-wall had been demolished, not in 1888 as usually reported but soon after the 1883 Master Plan had appeared. It had certainly happened by 1885 for Joseph Pennell's drawing of early that year already shows the

⁶⁹ *Correspondence Respecting the Proposed Expropriation of the Old Protestant Cemetery at Rome*, Italy, 1 (London, 1889), 3, quoted by Krogel, *All'ombra*, 200; 'The Protestant cemetery at Rome,' *HL Deb 28 March 1889 vol 334 cc998-1000*, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1889/mar/28/the-protestant-cemetery-at-rome> (accessed October 10, 2018); Sir Rennell Rodd, 'The preservation of the graves of Keats and Shelley,' *Bulletin and Review of the Keats-Shelley Memorial, Rome*, 2 (1913): 59-66; idem, *Social and Diplomatic Memories*, vol. 1 (London: Edward Arnold, 1922), 154-6; and Stanley-Price, *Non-Catholic Cemetery*, 104-8.

⁷⁰ Krogel, *All'ombra*, 202, n. 57.

⁷¹ For a map of one of the road proposals, see Wolfgang Krogel, 'Der Cimitero Acattolico in Rom. Stand, Religion und Nation als Merkmale von Ausgrenzung und Identität,' in *Protestanten zwischen Venedig und Rom in der Frühen Neuzeit*, ed. Uwe Israel and Michael Matheus (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2013), 89-112, Abb. 13.

destruction.⁷² That the breach in the wall had been made so promptly reinforced the fears of Rome's foreign residents that the Old Cemetery was about to be demolished.⁷³

The issue was of international diplomatic significance because the cemetery was designated for foreigners but also because its legal status was uncertain – the German ambassador to Italy had traditionally been responsible for it but the city of Rome claimed never to have yielded ownership of the land. Finally in 1910 an agreement was reached between the Mayor of Rome, Ernesto Nathan, the German ambassador, Gottlieb von Jagow, and the newly arrived British Ambassador, Sir Rennell Rodd, himself a classical scholar and poet, who had followed the controversy since the 1880s. The agreement prevented any future disturbance of the cemetery. But it remained a controversial political issue until after the first world war.⁷⁴ Not until 1932 was the long section of demolished city-wall reconstructed, making redundant the series of unsightly hoardings that had filled the gap for almost forty years.

Two previously unpublished images illustrate the Grave in this period when the road project was first proposed. In the foreground of the photograph (Figure 7) there are visible the outer wall of the moat and the path (seen also in Figure 3) worn by visitors crossing the meadow so as to gaze at Keats's grave. The vegetation inside the cemetery is luxuriant and plants are growing in the moat. The headstone to Arthur Severn, its inscription legible under magnification, stands on the right at the foot of his father's new grave. Behind Keats's grave the stone pine planted in 1875 is flourishing and behind Severn's stands the younger one known to have been planted in 1882. The photograph must date to soon after the latter year. Never previously described are the decorative iron railings. They close off the front of the graves but also have 'returns' running diagonally back to the box hedges, creating an effective barrier to intrusive visitors. The renovated grave of Keats also once had a simple railing in front of it.⁷⁵ It can have served for only a few years, between the work done in 1875 and 1882 (thus approximately dating Anderson's photo). The decorative railings are also depicted, in simplified form, in a painting by D. Sampson dated August 1883 (Figure 8).⁷⁶ They must therefore have been installed soon after Severn's interment. No railings are mentioned in accounts of the work done in 1875 or 1882, but George Gissing noted them along with Arthur Severn's little headstone on his visit in 1888, and other contemporary photographs show them.⁷⁷

Sampson, an amateur artist not otherwise identified, managed to confuse the graves, roughly inscribing the names of Keats and Severn on each other's headstone, and

⁷²Pennell, *An Italian Pilgrimage* (London, 1887), opp. 204. He must have done the sketch during his stay in 1885 (*ibid.*, 194), or, more precisely, from late 1884 until Carnival 1885 (E.R. Pennell, *The Life and Letters of Joseph Pennell*, vol. 1 (Boston: Little, Brown, 1929), 128–33).

⁷³E.g. the Lucas sisters. Robert Sénécal, transcribed and ed., *'Every body comes back to Rome': the Complete Letters of Matilda Lucas, 1871–1902*, vol. 2 (London: Gatehouse Editions, 2013), 951–2; and Augustus Hare, *Walks in Rome*, 13th ed., vol. 2 (London: G. Allen, 1893), 254–5.

⁷⁴Krogel, *All'ombra*, 194–232. The road proposal, revived during World War 2, was blocked by Swedish and Swiss diplomatic intervention; Johan Beck-Friis, *The Protestant Cemetery in Rome: the Cemetery of Artists and Poets* (Malmö: Allhems Förlag, [1956]), rep. Rome, 1982, 17.

⁷⁵Photo by Anderson <https://www.alinari.it/img-thumb/640/ADA/ADA-F-000259-0000.jpg> (accessed October 10, 2018).

⁷⁶A label on the verso gives the title and 'D. Sampson, Aug. 1883'. Keats House acquired it in 1951. I am grateful to the Principal Curator of Keats House, Rob Shakespeare, for allowing me to publish it here.

⁷⁷*Letters of George Gissing*, 249. They are illustrated in, e.g., John Hurst, 'The graves of Keats and Severn,' *The Critic*, October 26, 1895, 269. The railings, with their stone corner-posts, were re-discovered in 2017 in a re-use context inside the cemetery.



Figure 8. D. Sampson, *The English Cemetery, Rome, with the graves of Keats and Severn*, 1883, oil on canvas, 26 × 20 centimetres (Keats House Collection, K/PZ/05/005). Image courtesy of City of London Corporation, Keats House, Hampstead.

depicted the two stone pines as of equal height. He or she painted this view from outside the walled moat (visible in the foreground), as did other artists of the 1880s such as Ettore Roesler Franz and Lady Gregory.⁷⁸ But from 1899, or soon after, this perspective was no longer available to artists or to anyone else. The municipality, on request from the German ambassador following recent acts of vandalism, raised by one metre the height of the wall running along Via Marmorata.⁷⁹ Soon after, a similar wall was built outwards, perpendicular to Via Marmorata, to enclose the burial-ground on its long north side. Constructed right up against the outer wall of the moat, it blocked any view of the Grave from outside. Visitors entered the old cemetery through a new entrance away to the west (the roofed bridge entrance in the corner was closed) and walked across the graveyard to find the Grave. The new wall now left the Grave indubitably ‘in a corner’, as it is perceived today. Furthermore, the narrow space left between the wall/moat and the graves limited artists and photographers in what they could show. Views such as those by Chapman, Macpherson, Crane, Scott and Sampson disappear from the record.

⁷⁸Stanley-Price et al., *At the Foot of the Pyramid*, cat. no. 28 (Franz); National Library of Ireland, 3037 TX 26, dated c. 1889 (Lady Augusta Gregory) <http://catalogue.nli.ie/Record/vtls000049656> (accessed October 10, 2018).

⁷⁹Krogel, *All'ombra*, 207.

Complaints soon led to the inspired solution of opening a ‘window’ in the new wall opposite the Grave so that visitors could still admire it from outside. This option was available by 1904.⁸⁰ Another well-intentioned protective measure also led to visitors’ complaints. The combination of railings and box-hedges was effective in preventing access to the stones but made it hard to read their inscriptions.⁸¹ A concerned Rome resident, Professor Reynaud, discussed with the custodian about cutting through the side-railings, reducing the height of the box hedges, and retouching the lettering. The custodian intended also to fill in the moat to make a path in front of the graves – a goal that was not achieved until the 1950s.⁸²

Reynaud’s request was typical of those made by admirers of Keats who were concerned at the state of the Grave. Joseph Severn had felt responsible for its care but, following his death, formal responsibility devolved by default onto the custodian and the German ambassador to whom he reported. But, however esteemed the English poet, his grave was but one of several thousand to be taken care of, and the cemetery’s budget was meagre. Maintenance of the New Cemetery which was in active use for burials had priority. The preferable solution, that care of the Grave be guaranteed independently, was ultimately realized with the founding of the Keats–Shelley Memorial Association in 1903. Its committee took on responsibility for maintaining the graves of Keats, Shelley, Severn and Trelawny.⁸³ The double role of Rennell Rodd as chair of the executive committee and as the British ambassador negotiating with the mayor of Rome was crucial in eliminating the threat of demolition of the Grave and in ensuring its future care.

Conclusion

Many references to John Keats’s grave, both in the nineteenth century and in modern literature, characterize it as occupying a solitary or marginal location at Rome. The earlier accounts frequently call it ‘neglected’. The tradition of Protestant burial at night and under armed guard has, for some commentators, reinforced the pathos of the poet’s burial in a foreign land in the heart of Catholicism. An understanding of the historical evolution of the Protestant cemetery must modify such interpretations. The headstone of Keats occupied a distinctive spot, standing prominently in front of the graves of other distinguished figures. Even after the burial-ground was enclosed, it maintained this prominence, easily visible from outside the moat and the first one encountered by visitors entering the cemetery. Only at the turn of the century, when a high wall was added to the moat, did the perception of Keats’s grave being ‘in a corner’ gain real substance. The erection of the wall also severely restricted artists’ abilities to depict the graves of Keats and Severn as they had previously.

⁸⁰*T.P.’s Weekly* (London), May 19 and June 2, 1905, 617, 700; Arthur Guthrie, *Letters from France & Italy* (Chicago: McClurg & co, 1909), 164; J.W. and A.M. Cruickshank, *Christian Rome* (London: E. Grant Richards, 1906), 19. The narrow vertical opening, with an iron grille, survives today.

⁸¹So also *Letters of George Gissing*, 249.

⁸²Reynaud, letter dated February 7, 1899 to *New York Times*, March 4, 1899; Stanley-Price, *Non-Catholic Cemetery*, 47; Steele, ‘Keats’s grave,’ 9. The ‘Professor Reynaud’ was probably the guide-lecturer resident in Rome mentioned by Hare, *Walks in Rome*, 15th ed, vol. 1 (London: G. Allen, 1900), 19.

⁸³Rodd, *The graves*, 68.

Accusations of ‘neglect’ stemmed mainly from the grass that could obscure the headstone, grass whose growth was rarely controlled once the moat had excluded sheep and goats. Severn had assumed responsibility for care of the Grave but in his absence and in his old age, others took the initiative to make improvements. The transfer of Joseph Severn’s remains to lie alongside those of Keats, and the re-burial of Severn’s son Arthur, led to further changes in the Grave’s appearance which are documented in contemporary images. At the turn of the century, only diplomatic intervention at the highest level managed eventually to frustrate a proposal to demolish the grave of John Keats.

Accounts by visitors are a valuable source of information but cannot be drawn upon selectively. For the many visitors who used the term ‘neglect’ of the Grave, there was an equal number who felt only awe as pilgrims to the poet’s last resting-place (and even more visitors who never committed their experiences to print). Renewed exchanges in the 1950s about the ‘neglect’ of the grave revealed neatly the different preconceptions that influence the visitor’s perception of a place. The need to acknowledge the variety of visitor preconceptions and the changes through time of the setting of Keats’s grave must influence readings of its significance and ‘presence’ today.

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Notes on contributor

Nicholas Stanley-Price is a member of the Advisory Committee for the Non-Catholic Cemetery for Foreigners in Rome and has written extensively about its history and management. His *The Non-Catholic Cemetery in Rome. Its history, its people and its survival for 300 years* (2014) is published also in Italian and German, as is the catalogue of the exhibition that he curated in 2016 (*At the foot of the Pyramid: 300 years of the cemetery for foreigners in Rome*, with Mary K. McGuigan and John F. McGuigan Jr). His article ‘Shelley’s grave revisited’ appeared in the *The Keats-Shelley Journal* 65 (2016).