
Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Gates of Memory* by Geoffrey Keynes

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Source: *Biography*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Winter 1986), pp. 89-91

GEOFFREY KEYNES, *The Gates of Memory*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981. 428 pp. \$24.95.

In his autobiography, *The Gates of Memory*, Geoffrey Keynes mainly recollects his dual careers in surgery and in literary scholarship.

As a small boy he wanted to be a doctor, and he never wavered from this choice. As a medical student he gave his "whole being" to his studies, feeling that at last he was "doing something real, dealing with human beings and learning fast what is meant by suffering." At the end of his medical studies he determined to become a surgeon instead of a physician, because a surgeon was "a craftsman," who cured patients by "the skill of his own hands," and who based his craft "on a wide knowledge of human structure and biology, always gaining by experience of the results of his work." He served as surgeon in France throughout the First World War, gaining "extraordinary surgical experience from thousands of operations of all types." Afterwards he became one of the most distinguished of English surgeons, pioneering in his use of blood transfusion, in the operation of thymectomy for myasthenia gravis, and in his vigorous advocacy of conservative—as opposed to radical—surgery for breast cancer. In 1955 he was knighted for surgical distinction.

His interest in books, literature, and biography, developed as follows: as a school-boy he began collecting literary objects: the poems of his friend and contemporary Rupert Brooke; and then the seventeenth century works of the poet John Donne and the physician, and great "literary artist", Sir Thomas Browne. When he was a 20 year old undergraduate at Cambridge he saw some of William Blake's *Illustrations of the Book of Job* in a bookshop window, and he was not only attracted by the pictures, but was "immediately smitten by a deep interest in the artist, though I had not heard of him before . . . my feelings had arisen spontaneously and I proceeded to find out more about him." From then on Blake became his dominant interest outside of surgery. In 1921, after about 12 years of work, and two failed attempts, he published his massive *Bibliography of William Blake*. This was followed by his discovery of important Blake books and pictures, and his publication of a seriatim of books on Blake's life and work. His work led to a revival of interest in Blake, culminating in the recent Blake Trust (of which he is chairman) publication of facsimile reproductions of Blake's illuminated books.

It became his "principle" to "study in depth the works of an author whom I found interesting though unfashionable," largely through collecting books by and about the author (he has formed one of the world's great private libraries) and then publishing a bibliography. His work has then usually stimulated a renewed appreciation of the author. His bibliographies have been on Donne and Browne, John Evelyn, Dr. Robert Hooke, Jane Austen—whom he calls "my great literary heroine"—William Hazlitt, Rupert Brooke, and Siegfried Sassoon. He has also published a Catalogue of Edward Gibbon's library, and many works on the great physician and scientist, William Harvey. These latter include a little book, *The Personality of William Harvey*—where he discusses his discovery of hitherto unknown portraits of Harvey—and his massive *The Life of William Harvey*, which may become the definitive biography.

In his fascinating and insightful Presidential Address to the Bibliographical Society, "Religio Bibliographici" (reprinted in his autobiography), he comments how "hero-worship" has been "one of the possible triggers" of his bibliographic interest. This involves admiration for an individual's work, and then a desire to search out "every

aspect” of the individual’s biography. He then admits that a taste for bibliography “is not an indication of a creative mind, but rather a turn for craftsmanship, and for a certain tidiness.” “I am fully reconciled,” he writes, “to the fact that I have no creative originality.” This sense of being a craftsman is the link between his work in surgery and his work in literature. Another link is his sense that in both surgery and literature he has followed the intellectual tradition of Charles Darwin (he knew members of the Darwin family and married one of Darwin’s granddaughters). He writes that Darwin’s “whole life work” was characterised by “the passion for truth and accuracy.” He also observes that his work in literature has functioned “to keep alive in my mind the value of imagination in a material world—an important background to a profession [surgery] which might lead to a slight twist of inhumanity.”

In the middle of his autobiography, as he recounts the burgeoning of his two careers, Keynes states that he wanted, “above all,” the “understanding and affection of friends and family.” He touches on his generally happy relations with his parents, wife, and his sons (while admitting that his preoccupation with his work caused his sons to see little of him as they were growing up). He writes that he had “great admiration” for his older brother, John Maynard Keynes, but that this brother took little notice of him during his formative years. Just how this older brother—so exceptional in his intelligence and creativity—influenced his younger brother, remains undetermined. Geoffrey Keynes is at his best when he recollects his enormously varied friendships; with eminent scientists, physicians and surgeons, authors, artists (of varied kinds), and poets, as well as with humbler individuals who came to him because they shared some of his interests, or as patients. In each of these contacts he has experienced pleasure in learning about another individual, and then in revealing parts of himself to this individual.

Reading *The Gates of Memory* caused me to recollect my one meeting with Keynes, 32 years ago, in his Hampstead home. After dinner he and I sat in his library, and he questioned me about my professional work in surgery, and my interest in history and biography. He encouraged me to go on with both my work and interests, and spoke of his sense of having achieved much in his two careers. He then showed me some of his books—including Blake’s 1798 copy of *Bacon’s Essays*, which contained Blake’s caustic pencilled comments on Bacon (this book is mentioned in some detail in *Gates of Memory*). His manner was simple and direct, and somewhat reserved. I sensed that beneath this reserve there lurked an intensity of feeling. When I told him that I admired the precision and vividness of his writing in his (then) recently published *Personality of William Harvey*, he read some passages from this book aloud. These included his conclusion where he described the bust of Harvey, placed above the church vault, which held Harvey’s tomb. “The bust of Harvey, 27 inches in height, is so well fashioned and is so lifelike that I am unable to subscribe to the idea that it was made from a death-mask. From a life-mask, perhaps; or it may even have been made during Harvey’s life, at the same time as the statue placed in the College of Physicians in 1652. The face with its wrinkles and creases (and again note the distended temporal vein) is not dead. Here you have the authentic Harvey looking at life as it really is—honest, forthright, in the best sense of the word *scientific* [italics in original].” I remember thinking, as I listened to him read, that these last words applied to himself as well as Harvey.

Keynes wrote his autobiography in his ninety-third and ninety-fourth years, and died months after it was published. His book is extraordinary not only for what it re-

lates, but for the power of his memory, for his realism and honesty, and for his unflagging love of life: what he describes, at the end of his autobiography, as “my quite outrageously enjoyable existence.”

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