



THE
JOHN CLARE SOCIETY
Newsletter

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THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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Editorial

Welcome to this first e-newsletter. I'm sorry that I wasn't able to get an electronic version sent out in October, as I had planned. I came across technical difficulties, which I simply couldn't solve in time. The content of this issue is identical with that of the printed newsletter, but obviously I have formatted it differently, and have tried to make it easy to read onscreen. Please let me have your comments.

The last newsletter celebrated the Society's Festival. This issue has two accounts of the Day with Two Johns that was held last September, and, on p.8, a shortened version of the talk that was given by Rodney Lines. Members who were unable to attend that event will have another opportunity in April. Further details will be found on p.8 of the newsletter.

My grateful thanks to the contributors to this newsletter. Please let me have material for the June issue by 4 May 2012.

Valerie Pedlar
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Samuel Palmer, Early Morning (1825).

A Day with Two Johns (1)

24 September 2011

Which two poets rejected their fathers' ambitions for them? And were very sensitive to momentous changes in the landscapes of their lives? And have been largely ignored and under-valued by academia? The answer is, of course, John Betjeman and John Clare.



Rodney Lines giving his address.
Photograph by Peter Moyse.

Rodney Lines, a JCS Vice-President, gave us a talk on the two Johns with wit and panache, generously illustrated with readings from the work of these two poets, seemingly so different, yet with some features in common. And the affection and enthusiasm which each John has inspired in his readers was very evident at the joint meeting in Helpston of the John Clare Society and the Shires branch of the Betjeman Society.

About two dozen members from each society gathered in the very room where Clare's coffin lay overnight before his burial in the nearby churchyard. After Rodney's talk John Langford of the Betjeman Society gave us a very pleasing anecdote about Clare's 'Journey out of Essex'

and unveiled a painting by Rigby Graham from that artist's series inspired by Clare's sad journey.

After lunch the company divided into three groups, one to watch a film about Betjeman, two to walk round Clare's village, and all to visit Clare's cottage and its splendid garden. Last of all, before a parting cup of tea, we heard a fine programme of very accomplished readings, of characteristic poems by each John, in the village church. Clare Society members were glad to have such a delightful introduction to a poet who, for some, was little known. And the sun shone in Helpston.

Peter Cox
(John Clare Society)

A Day with Two Johns (2)

I felt that I'd a right to song
And sung - but in a timid strain
Of fondness for my native plain
For every thing I felt a love
The weeds below the birds above
John Clare

For myself
I knew as soon as I could read and write
That I must be a poet.
....
My urge was to encase in rhythm and rhyme
The things I saw and felt (I could not think).
John Betjeman

Planning and cooperation between committee members of The John Clare Society and The Shires Branch of The Betjeman Society resulted in a most rewarding day touching upon the lives and works of the two poets, and enjoyed by over fifty devotees from both societies.

Our meeting place in Helpston at 10.30 am was The Exeter Arms, in the very room where John Clare's body had been laid to rest on its final journey from Northampton in 1864. After coffee we had introductions from Ann Ward, Chairman of The Shires Branch, and words of welcome from Dr David Pattison, Chairman of The Betjeman Society, underlining how good it was that two societies (both members of The Alliance of Literary Societies) could come together in this way.

Ann introduced our principal speaker, Rodney Lines, one of the people who, thirty years ago and more, had played a major role in bringing John Clare to the prominence his work deserves. Participants were privileged to enjoy a splendid presentation by Rodney on the work of our two heroes, men in one sense so different in back-ground and upbringing, yet yielding, for those with the eyes to see, so many correspondences.

John Langford then talked briefly about John Clare's 'Journey out of Essex', his epic walk in 1841 - 100 miles and 4 days - down the Great North Road from Epping Forest to Northborough, displaying the painting North Fen Road by Rigby Graham. The artist had created a number of watercolours, pen and ink drawings and woodcuts depicting sites on Clare's journey as they appeared in 1991 - exactly 150 years later. A television documentary, produced by Charles Mapleston (1992), was also alluded to.

In the afternoon, two prominent members of the John Clare Society, Peter Moyse and Peter Cox, led walks round the village, including, of course, John Clare's cottage, now beautifully restored and maintained by a Trust, and there was an opportunity to visit Botolph's Bar, where a John Clare DVD was shown by Sue Holgate. Other participants enjoyed, in the Exeter Arms, two documentary films depicting aspects of the life and work of John Betjeman presented by Jim Sterling and Horace Liberty, Shires Branch Committeemen.

It was soon 3.30, time for everyone to repair to St Botolph's church, where Rodney Lines and Ann Ward had arranged a session of readings, all conveyed with considerable feeling, by members of both societies. Ann Ward presented Rodney with a framed copy of one of his favourite Betjeman poems, done on nice Beaulieu paper and signed by JB. Tea and cakes back at the Exeter Arms concluded a most stimulating day.

John Langford
(Betjeman Society)



Participants at the Exeter Arms. Photograph by Peter Moyse.

A Day with Two Johns - repeat

The promised repeat of A Day with Two Johns, held last September, as a joint event of The John Clare Society and the Shires Branch of The Betjeman Society, will be on 28 April 2012.

Rodney Lines will again speak on 'The Two Johns'. A village walk, a tour of Clare Cottage and poems in the village church will be included.

Please contact John Langford if interested: 114 Breedon Street, Long Eaton, Nott NG10 6RL.



John Betjeman and John Clare

For myself,
I knew as soon as I could read and write
That I must be a poet. Even today,
When all the way from Cambridge comes a wind
To blow the lamps out every time they're lit,
I know that I must light mine up again.

My father smiled:
"And how's our budding bard? Let what you write
Be funny, John, and original."

My urge was to encase in rhythm and rhyme
The things I saw and felt (I could not think)

The gap between my feelings and my skill
Was so immense, I wonder I went on.

(Summoned by Bells, p.16)

.....

I cannot say what led me to dabble in rhyme or at what age I began to write it, but my first were imitations of my father's songs, for he knew and sung a great many. I made a many things before I ventured to commit them to writing for I felt ashamed to expose them on paper and after I ventured to write them down my second thoughts blushed over them and I burnt them for a long time, but as my feeling grew into song I felt a desire to preserve some and

used to correct them over and over until the last copy had lost all kindred to the first, even in the title. (*John Clare by Himself*, p.98)

Betjeman and Clare: at first sight one might well wonder what these two poets could possibly have in common. Betjeman, a townie – Londoner – from the lower-upper-middle class (as Orwell would define it) – not quite upper middle because they were in trade. Wealthy enough, however, to send their only child John to Prep school, Public school – Marlborough – and Oxford (Magdalen College, no less). Clare's father, on the other hand, was a poor farm labourer, a thresher, barely able to read and write, mother illiterate, living in a remote Northamptonshire village.

The Betjemans, however, had only recently achieved their present status. They were descended from poor immigrants from north Germany around the end of the eighteenth century on the father's side and from Lincolnshire lime-burners and builders – the Dawsons – on the mother's side.

The Clares, too, were aspirational. Was not Parker Clare – John's father – the illegitimate son of a Scottish schoolmaster? (This, by the way, makes John Clare a quarter Scottish.) Being their only son – there was a younger sister – they somehow contrived to send him to nearby Glinton school after an initial spell at a Helpston dame-school, where he first learnt to read and write. Glinton was no ordinary 3Rs village school, but one founded by a bishop of Peterborough and endowed by several wealthy patrons to provide for the sons and daughters of comfortably-off farmers and prosperous tradespeople. The curriculum was broad and academic and but for the fact that Latin was not taught, a grammar school in all but name. Probably as good as Betjeman got at the Dragon School at Oxford. Having to leave at the age of thirteen for financial reasons, the master continued to teach this gifted boy in the evenings free of charge. So much for the myth of the self-educated John Clare who could not spell or punctuate properly.

Both boys similarly disappointed their parents. Instead of following the Edwardian *cursus honorum* of his class – public school, Oxbridge, family business – Betjeman failed his degree, refused to follow in his father's footsteps and wandered into the world of poetry and journalism. Clare, after his parents' sacrifice and his schoolmaster's generosity, was expected to become a surveyor, solicitor's clerk, or schoolteacher – but no. He drifted into odd jobs – gardening, pot-boy, lime-burner. He said he was 'itching after rhyme'. After many vicissitudes he finally achieved this in 1820 with the highly successful publication of his first collection of poems, winning at the same time the patronage of Lord Burghley and Lord Fitzwilliam (Tory and Whig

respectively) and culminating with his portrait painted by London artist William Hilton, R.I.

Childhood, not surprisingly, had an immense influence on both poets. Betjeman's, initially, was happy:

Safe were those evenings of the pre-war world
Safe, in a world of trains and buttered toast.

(*Summoned*, p.4)

Both realised growing up could be painful:

Childhood is measured out by sounds and smells
And sights, before the dark of reason grows.

(*Ibid*, p.38)

Ah, what a paradise begins with life and what a wilderness the knowledge of the world discloses. Surely the Garden of Eden was nothing more than our first parents' entrance upon life and the loss of it their knowledge of the world.

(*By Himself*, p.36)

Clare's childhood, despite the poverty, was idyllic, with doting parents. Betjeman's, despite the wealth, less so, the child of a less-than-happy marriage:

These were the years when love gave way to fear,
I feared my father, loved my mother more

(*Summoned*, p.80)

There were compensations, though, for they both discovered girls!

O Peggy Purey-Cust, how pure you were:

My first and purest love, Miss Purey-Cust!

(*Summoned*, p.25)

There were others of course: Wendy, Pam, Myfanwy, and most famous of all, Miss Joan Hunter Dunn. He had what his wife Penelope called 'his crushes', mostly quite harmless. Both poets wrote love poems about real and imaginary women. Both poets put women on pedestals. Clare's life-long obsession was Mary Joyce, despite being married to Martha Turner. Like Betjeman, Mary was his schoolgirl sweetheart:

As I grew up a man I mixed more in company and frequented dancings for the sake of meeting with the lasses, for I was a lover very early in life, my first attachment being a schoolboy affection, Mary. If I could but gaze on her face or fancy a smile on her countenance it was sufficient, I went away satisfied. We played with each other but named nothing of love, yet I fancied her eyes told me her affections. We walked together as school companions in leisure hours, but our talk was of play and our actions the wanton innocence of children. Yet young as my heart was it would turn chill when I touched her hand and trembled and I fancied her feelings were the same for as I gazed earnestly in her face a tear would hang in her smiling eye and she would turn to wipe it away. (*By Himself*, p.87)

Although Mary died tragically young and unmarried, she both haunted and inspired his writing through the 23 years long incarceration in Northampton asylum. Betjeman on the other hand famously declared to Jonathan Stedall late in life that he hadn't had enough sex – a sentiment no doubt equally shared by Clare too.

I started by saying that unlike Clare, Betjeman was a townie, but love of the countryside developed early in life with family holidays in Cornwall. It became the land of his heart, and he was captivated by its rugged beauty, its Celtic saints, its churches and its characters. At the outbreak of World War II his mind goes back to childhood days at Trebetherick, when he recalls friends – Ralph, Vasey, Alastair, Bidy and John – some of whom he may never see again:

We used to picnic where the thrift

Grew deep and tufted to the edge ('Trebetherick')

Clare similarly looked back at childhood's innocent games in his beloved Helpston countryside:

When jumping time away on old Crossberry Way

And eating haws like sugar plums ere they had lost
the may ('Remembrances')

Nature for Clare signified love, peace, freedom and joy as well as how fragile it all was: 'O I never thought that joys would run away from boys' ('Remembrances').

For both poets it is Man who is the enemy and the greatest threat to Nature, and for Clare the enclosure of the common land and the loss of old freedoms and customs that took place while he was growing up was heartbreaking, something he never came to terms with. Similarly Betjeman witnessed the violation of the Cornish coast by uncontrolled development, litter, pollution, sewage, corrugated iron, shacks, oil and tar. Just read the poem 'Delectable Duchy' and you'll see.

Betjeman's love of the countryside was further developed while at Marlborough School, where he made frequent forays with an encouraging and sympathetic art master. Then there were the annual visits to Lincolnshire to meet old Oxford chums, which he celebrates in several fine poems. But it was in Uffington, in Berkshire, newly married to Penelope, where he first encountered Clare's experience of countryside and places destroyed by greed and ignorance. His portrait of a selfish, uncaring farmer in 'The Dear Old Village', is based on sentiments shared entirely by Clare in his satire *The Parish*, where he rails against farmers who had got rich from the enclosure of the common land. But although Betjeman was familiar with Clare's poetry, I doubt if he knew this particular one, since *The Parish* was not published until 1985 by Professor Eric Robinson after transcribing the manuscripts in Peterborough Museum. They are probably both indebted to Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* at a guess.

Betjeman's anger finally boils over in the 1960's, a time when we all witnessed the wholesale ripping out of hedges, cutting down of trees, burning of stubble and spraying all manner of toxic chemicals on the land:

We spray the fields and scatter
The poison on the ground ('Harvest Hymn')

Clare reacts likewise to the meanness of the nouveau-riche farmers with a couplet thus:

That could they find a fart of any use
They'd even burst before they'd set it loose!

(*The Parish*, ed Robinson, p.90)

But neither of our poets is really at home as a satirist – you have to possess spleen and invective and neither had the ability to hate like a Swift or a Pope. They were at their best writing about things they loved, often quite ordinary commonplace things that most of us wouldn't perhaps think of as poetic material – a field of broad beans in blossom, an Oxford suburb, a nonconformist meeting-house, an aged tree, or Croydon, for that matter.

Clare often begins his poems with the words 'I love':

I love to walk the fields – they are to me
A legacy no evil can destroy ('Summer Images')

Betjeman virtually paralleled him with:

I like the way these old brick garden walls
Unevenly run down to Letcombe Brook.

('On Leaving Wantage')

'I love – I like'. Perhaps Clare was the more passionate and intense – maybe that's why he burned out so tragically – and Betjeman was more detached but compassionate, but both were acute and accurate observers who wrote in poetry that we can immediately connect with. Both similarly suffered at the hands of academic detractors and critics who saw them as unintellectual, even trivial sometimes, mere versifiers, men who looked backward and hated change. But we know different, and times are changing, and much is due to the work of our two societies in fostering a deeper understanding of two poets so often underrated and even wilfully misunderstood. Both poets transcended their backgrounds, their class, their times even, to create poetry, and prose too, that was uniquely theirs, that touches the human heart, that fires the imagination, that opens our eyes and enriches all our lives.

Rodney Lines

Unless otherwise indicated, Clare poems are quoted from *The Midsummer Cushion*, edited by RKR Thornton (Carcenet, 1978), and Betjeman poems from *Collected Poems* (John Murray, 2006).

John Clare in the Company of Mesmerists

During a visit to London, in the summer of 1824, in addition to seeking advice and treatment for his depression, John Clare 'indulged with some of the towns amusements' along with his friend Edward Ripplingille. On one such occasion their amusement was provided by the renowned phrenologist Jean Deville, who complimented Clare on his bountiful cranial topography, surmising from his tactile survey: 'heres ideality... I should say that you have a talent for poetry I dont say that you are a poet but that you have a talent for it if applied...are you a poet?' 'Yes' came the poet's reply. 'Aye aye the systems right' replied the phrenologist, (*John Clare by Himself*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, 1996). Though agreeing to Deville's request to make a plaster cast of his head, judging from the hints of cynicism in his written account, Clare was hardly a credulous client, enduring the experience with a good humoured forbearance.

Whether Clare entertained a similar scepticism about that other popular pseudo-science gripping Victorian society some twenty years later, namely the 'mania for mesmerism', is less certain. Moreover, whether Clare was still in full possession of that same rational faculty by this time also remains questionable. By 1844, his circumstances, morale and mental health had deteriorated drastically, from the highs of a celebrated Regency poet to feelings of despair and abandonment, as an inmate of the county lunatic asylum in Northampton.

At Northampton Clare initially fell under the auspices, (if not 'spell-bound' control), of the asylum superintendent Dr Thomas Prichard; a man described by a local newspaper editor as: 'not mad but just on the other side of that thin partition by which madness is said to be bounded'. Of Prichard it was said, by the same journalist, that 'Clare believed him to be possessed of some supernatural powers which made it as unsafe to disobey him when he was absent as when he was present' (Jonathan Bate, *John Clare*, 2003). Prichard was a progressive enthusiast of novel treatments for mental illness, in particular replacing the punitive strategy of coercion and restraint with that of moral management; he may have also experimented with mesmeric therapies. However, there is no evidence to suggest that Clare was ever subjected to mesmeric treatments.

A plethora of publications, books, periodicals and pamphlets, advocating the curative, analgesic and even clairvoyant powers of mesmerism, appeared around this time. As an avid reader, with an eclectic taste and insatiable appetite for knowledge, two popular titles

on mesmerism that Clare may have come across were written by two acquaintances of his: *Facts in mesmerism with reasons for a dispassionate inquiry into it* (1844) by the poet Chauncey Hare Townshend, and *Mesmeric Experiences* (1845) by Spencer T. Hall. Townshend, a student at Cambridge when Clare first met him in 1820, was a close friend of Charles Dickens, who also became a proficient mesmerist. Townshend carried out many experiments on mesmerism in the late 1830s and his book was one of the most respected treatises on the subject; sensible and philosophical, and encouraging further research. Spencer Hall was also a published poet, and presented one of his own volumes of verse, *The Upland Hamlet* (1847), to Clare, possibly during one of his visits to Northampton. He was also a close friend and frequent guest of the literary family of William and Mary Howitt; recounting in his book, *Mesmeric Experiences*, séances he performed in their presence.

Among his many guises, Hall described himself as a Lecturer in Phrenopathy, a dubious assimilation of the pseudo-sciences phrenology and mesmerism. Whereas phrenological examination involved tactile contact, tracing the contours of the skull to 'read' social and intellectual attributes, some mesmerists manipulated the head with more ambitious motives. When a subject was in a hypnotised state, by touching specifically mapped 'phrenological organs' on the entranced person's cranium, (e.g. ideality, veneration, hope, language, imitation, destructiveness, benevolence etc.), the mesmerist was supposedly able to summon an appropriate, characteristic reaction! Mesmerism combined with phrenology made for entertaining, animated theatre.

Spencer Hall was one of many peripatetic practitioners of the 'mesmeric arts', who travelled the country in the mid-1840s, giving public lectures and demonstrations, attracting and entertaining huge audiences of up to three thousand. Hall presented his first public display to a Northampton audience around May 1843. Apparently, on this occasion, his presentation was 'met with violent and unjustifiable opposition...by the faculty and the press at Northampton'; to quote his own words. It was also around this time that Hall first met Clare. Whether Clare had the opportunity to witness such demonstrations of mesmerism or whether he ever discussed the subject with the likes of Hall is unknown. Certainly he would have been aware of the mesmeric mania sweeping the country at the time.

Experimenting clubs and local mesmeric societies sprang up around the country. In Northampton a 'Phreno-Magnetic Class' was formed (magnetism was thought to play a fundamental mechanistic role in mesmerism), inspired by one of Hall's lecture demonstrations. Reports on the meetings and findings of these amateur, provincial groups were published in the *Phreno-magnet*, a monthly journal

founded and edited by Spencer Hall. A friend of Hall's and a regular contributor to the Phreno-Magnet was the Northampton iron-master and inventor, Joseph Stenson. Experimenting with mesmerism, as a possible remedial treatment, Stenson published a number of case studies in Spencer Hall's journal in 1843, claiming to have cured patients/clients with 'periodical fits' or episodes of 'gloominess and melancholy'.

Stenson was a frequent visitor at the Northampton asylum and struck up a close friendship with John Clare, whose poetry he greatly admired. He first met Clare through their mutual friend, William Knight, the asylum House Steward and transcriber of Clare's poems. Spencer Hall visited Clare on two or three occasions, probably through their mutual acquaintance of Stenson. Hall later recounted these meetings in his *Biographical Sketches of Remarkable People* (1873), where he described Clare's claim to fame as a prize-fighter and certain other apparent delusions, as well as his longing to return home. Given Clare's munificent cranium – an alluring landscape likely to entice the laying of hands by any quizzical phrenologist – one wonders whether any of these mesmeric practitioners, Prichard, Hall or Stenson, ever contemplated or even dared to woo Clare as an amenable medium or suitable case for treatment. An unlikely scenario, I imagine, considering the essence of compliance in such a venture and Clare's taciturn, fractious nature, aside from any scepticism on his part.



Portrait of Clare by Thomas Grimshaw, 1844.

Adding to its entertainment value, mesmerism could, 'evidently', expand the powers of perception and cognition; thus so-called mesmerised 'travelling clairvoyants' could supposedly perceive events, people and places through the dimensions of time and space. A pretentious faculty, perhaps not lost to the imagination of John Clare, when it came to inquisitive, impressionable visitors, whom he sometimes bewildered with historical masquerades. Were these histrionics, at times, performed to humour or dupe the condescending

and curious, rather than being actual involuntary delusions, symptomatic of an undiagnosed mental state? Indeed, a retrospective psychoanalysis might, on occasion, question the balance or division of 'sanity' between Clare the patient with his supposed visions and the predisposed, 'mesmerised' credulity of some of his visitors!

On 16 July, 1844, Mary Howitt visited Clare, presenting him with a copy of her husband's volume, *Book of the Seasons*, which featured some of Clare's own poetry. As later related by her friend Mary Mitford in *Recollections of a Literary Life* (1852), during Howitt's meeting with Clare, he described 'a narrative of the execution of Charles the First, recounted... as a transaction that occurred yesterday, and of which he (Clare) was an eyewitness – a narrative the most graphic and minute, with an accuracy as to costume and manners far exceeding what would probably have been at his command if sane. It is such a lucidity as the disciples of Mesmer claim for clairvoyance.' Similar theatrical narratives were told by Clare of the battle of the Nile and the death of Lord Nelson, when he fancied himself as one of the sailors who had been in action at the time. These stories of Clare were later recounted by JF Nisbet in his book, *The Insanity of Genius* (1891): 'His memory was astonishing. He seemed to assimilate everything he read or heard, picturing events so vividly in his mind that he related afterwards as if he had seen and taken part in them.'

As Roy Porter suggests, in his essay on Clare's asylum experiences, 'All Madness for Writing', what might otherwise be seen, in normal everyday life, as mere theatrical melodrama, in the context of the asylum assumes the characteristic behaviour of a mentally disturbed mind. Perhaps Clare's reminiscing fantasies simply reflected disguised desires, like those of Woody Allen's chameleonic Leonard Zelig. Or was he, indeed, contriving charades, amusing himself while bemusing his 'entranced' audience, by entering into the true spirit of 'travelling clairvoyance' and the consuming mesmeric mania of the times?

Mick Schrey

This article is indebted to Alison Winter, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (University of Chicago Press, 1998).

Lotte Kramer, *New and Collected Poems*. Rockingham Press, 2011. 398pp. £9.99.

Three years ago I was invited to review Lotte Kramer's latest poems. Her *New and Collected Poems*, 'my body of work' she calls them in her moving introduction, recall how 'she began to write seriously and memories came flooding in' of childhood in Nazi Germany and being transported to England, aged 15, in 1939. There are nearly 400 pages of poems written since 1968, including 40 translations of Rilke and others. Many in the Society will be familiar with her work, described by Gillian Allnutt in the Poetry Review as 'precise, passionate poems that refuse to do less than look for the light here, now and in the darkest places of her memory'. There are poems of paintings, music and places including the Peterborough landscape: 'At Burghley House', 'Lane at Longthorpe', 'Train Journey to Ely' and, of course, 'John Clare's Language':

Belief was poetry as sure as his huge sky
Singing through grass and torment, birds and joy.

New and Collected Poems is a magnificent achievement: a feast to dip into, to read aloud as I intend to at my next monthly poetry reading group. We will piece together this brave lady's story I am privileged to be party to through reading her life's work and, in doing so, share with others her sadness and joy. Reading her poems on the Central Line, en route to voluntary work at Westminster Abbey reinforced the pleasure we all share in reading poetry. Later, thinking about her life while standing in Poets' Corner, close to the plaques of Clare, and now Ted Hughes, made me grateful for all those who have enriched our lives through this medium. Long may that last.

Penny Freeston

Midsummer cushions

I wonder whether the making of midsummer cushions, the lovely tradition that has been revived by the children of Helpston, is something which also used to happen in other parts of the country. To quote Clare: it was 'a very old custom among villagers in summer time to stick a piece of greensward full of field flowers and place it as an ornament in their cottages which ornaments are called Midsummer Cushions'. Recently I came across a reference to much the same tradition in the Lake District though this time in early spring. This may already be widely known but it was interesting to find Wordsworth mentioning it in his poem 'To the same flower' ('The Celandine'):

Soon as gentle breezes bring
News of winter's vanishing,
And the children build their bowers,
Sticking 'kerchief-plots of mould
All about with full-blown flowers,
Thick as sheep in shepherd's fold!
With the proudest thou art there,
Mantling in the tiny square.

I mentioned this to a friend who worked for the Lake District National Park in the 1970s and she remembered being told of this tradition, probably by an elderly farmer's wife. I would be very interested to hear if anyone has heard of a similar tradition in any other part of Britain.

Bridget Smith



Midsummer cushions alongside Clare's grave. Photograph by Valerie Pedlar.

Clare and Freedom

Member Lionel Little has drawn my attention to an article in the Guardian (20 December 2011) by the environmentalist, George Monbiot. In this article Monbiot discusses the concept of 'negative freedom': the necessity of curtailing some people's freedom in order to secure the freedom of others. In support of his argument he cites Clare's poem, 'The Fallen Elm', which he describes as 'one of the greatest poems of the 19th century'. In his opinion this poem 'could be seen as the founding document of British environmentalism', for in it the poet shows his understanding of the way that a powerless person's freedom can be impeded by the exercise of freedom by the powerful:

Self-interest saw thee stand in freedom's ways
So thy old shadow must a tyrant be.
Thou'st heard the knave, abusing those in power
Bawl freedom loud and then oppress the free.

Anyone interested in reading the full article will find it at www.guardian.co.uk.



FORTHCOMING EVENTS

February 21 - RSPB Evening with Chris Andrews talking about Birds in Myth and Folklore, 7-9pm. £5 including glass of wine.

February 24 - Literary Dinner at the William Cecil Hotel, Stamford – guest speaker Simon Hoggart. Details from Clare Cottage.

March 5 - Launch of 2012 John Clare Poetry Competition. Details from Clare Cottage.

April 14 - Dr Sam Ward is giving the John Clare lecture at the Wenlock Poetry Festival. See <http://johnclaresociety.blogspot.com>

April 28 - A Day with Two Johns – Helpston.

July 13-15 – John Clare Society Festival – Helpston.

NEW MEMBERS

We welcome the following new members since our last newsletter:

Beth Atkinson from London
Doris Baxter from Kettering
Roger Breeze from Welshpool (re-join)
Kenneth and Judith Butler from Stanground, Peterborough
Terence Byford from Birmingham
David Cooper from Lancaster
Donald Ekless from Gloucester
Alan and Jean Ford from Sleaford
Mr. B.J. Hayward from Glasgow
Arthur Homer from New England, USA
Erica McAlpine from Atlanta, USA
Jan Morrell from Deeping St. James
Carmel Reynolds from Huddersfield
Russell Robertson from Bungay
Sean Skehan from Turvey, Beds
Roy Taylor from Colchester
Ronald and Beryl Teasdale from Stamford
John Wright from Durham, North Carolina, USA