



THE
JOHN CLARE SOCIETY
Newsletter

June 2015

No. 124



THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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EDITORIAL

This year our annual Festival will be held, as usual in Helpston, on 10-12 July. And the *John Clare Society Journal* will be available for collection by those who are able to attend the Festival.

I should like to take this opportunity to congratulate the *Journal's* editor, Simon Kövesi, on his promotion to Professor of English Literature. Simon has been a champion of Clare for many years, but most recently he organized, as part of the 150th anniversary commemorative events, the successful conference, *John Clare in Space*, at Oxford Brookes University, where he is Head of English and Modern Languages. (There was a full report in Newsletter No.122.)

He has also been closely associated with the exciting and innovative film, *By Our Selves*, about Clare's journey home from Epping, made by Andrew Kötting in collaboration with Iain Sinclair, which will be premiered at the Cambridge Film Festival in September 2015. There will also be a showing of the film on 20 June in London. For details see: <http://www.opencitylondon.com/films/our-selves>.

Earlier this year, Simon presented a paper at the session on Clare at the MLA annual convention in USA. There is a report of this session on p.13.

And on p.7 you will find a fascinating article by another indefatigable champion of Clare's work, John Goodridge.

My grateful thanks to him and to all the other contributors to this newsletter. The next issue will contain reports on the various activities of the Festival and I will welcome all contributions, verbal and visual, by 1 September 2015.

The 2015 John Clare Society Festival – 10-12 July ***John Clare and the Seeds of Change***

We are again using the church for the Annual General Meeting, talks and the concert. The stalls will be mostly in Botolph's Barn with a couple on the green near the Memorial. **Because the School has their own event on Saturday 11 July, we have been offered a field opposite the school for parking. There will also be limited parking in the car park at the Exeter Arms.**

Friday 10 July

The Midsummer Cushions ceremony will once again take place at **1.30 pm** at Helpston Parish Church, when the prize-winning poems from the competition for pupils of the John Clare Primary School will be read. It is hoped that Peterborough Poet Laureate, Peter Irvine, will say a few words to the children. This is always a delightful occasion when children from the school bring their trays of flowers to put around Clare's grave – do come along if you can!

Pete Shaw is, as usual, holding a folk music session in the Bluebell pub on the Friday evening at **8.00 pm** where there will be drinks and light refreshments available. There will also be an evening event, **6-8 pm**, at Torpel Field on the edge of the village – a place that Clare knew well and of course wrote about, presented by the Langdyke Trust.

Saturday 11 July

On the Saturday there will be coffee and tea available at the Bluebell pub from **9.30 am** and in the Cottage from 10.00 am. Botolph's Barn will be open from 9.30 am with various stalls to include 3 bookstalls. We have willow-weaving taking place on the village green near the Memorial. The Sales stall this year will be in Peter Moyses's courtyard, 1a West Street and the Membership, Programme and Ticket stall will be at the back of the church.

As usual the AGM will be in the church in the centre of the village. For those of you who have never been to Helpston, St. Botolph's is a lovely Norman church, with Saxon roots, and we will again be using it for talks, poetry readings and the evening concert. During the morning our Presidential Address will be given as usual by Dr Ronald Blythe.

Lunches will be available in the Village Hall and the Cottage. We have folk dancing around the village and the Annakinn Gallery will be open.

In the afternoon, our Annual Lecture will be given by Dr Robert Heyes, a long-standing member of the Society and of the Committee.

His talk will be based on our theme this year, 'John Clare and the Seeds of Change'.

Following the lecture you could meet up with friends for afternoon tea in the Village Hall or have a go at our Village Quiz. This has been put together by Anna Kinnaird and it will take you around the village: look out for clues! There will be a prize for the successful entry.

The Festival would not be the same without our poetry reading session. Peter Cox will take charge of this as usual, so please bring your favourite Clare poem along and make contact with him during the day.

The Concert this year is give by Chris Harrison, the great-great-grandson of Joseph Skipsey (see book review on p.17). He will be singing settings of Clare's poems and some of Clare's tunes. Tickets will be on sale at the Festival.

Sunday 12 July

We will be having the usual Clare-related church service at **10.45 am** and we will finish the Festival with a glass of wine and our annual toast to John Clare!

We will be running the Friends of Festival scheme again this year and a separate attachment is being sent about this with the Newsletter. The benefits of the scheme (apart from showing your support for the Festival) include a free copy of the Programme (£2.00) and a copy of the Helpston Village Quiz (£2.00). You can also buy concert tickets in advance.

If you are not able to get to the festival this year, you might still like to receive a copy of the programme and/or the poetry trail. These are £2 each plus £1.50 p&p. If so, just send your cheque (payable to the John Clare Society) to Sue Holgate.

We hope, as always, that the weather will be kind to us and we look forward to meeting you and your friends during the weekend.

Sue Holgate – Festival Co-ordinator

Meyerstein Reads the Tibbles: Chatterton's Biographer on Clare's Biography

John Clare shared a biographer with Thomas Chatterton in Frederick Martin, whose *Memoir* of Chatterton introduced a selection of the poet's work in 1865, the year Martin's *Life of Clare* was published. I have now found an intriguing, unrecorded connection between the two poets' later biographers, in linked association copies of J.W. and Anne Tibble's *John Clare: A Life* (1932), and their edition of Clare's *Letters* (1951). I bought these two volumes from the Poetry Bookshop in Hay-on-Wye in July 2011, along with a soft-bound proof copy of the Tibbles' 1956 study of Clare which may possibly derive from the same source. The copies of the Clare *Life* and *Letters* both enclose original letters to the books' owner, R.N. Green-Armytage, from Chatterton's biographer E.H.W. Meyerstein, and from Clare's biographer Anne Tibble. I'll deal with the Tibble letters in a later article. Here I want to look at the Meyerstein material, which is in the first of the volumes, the *Life*.

Edward Harry William Meyerstein (1889-1952) is now remembered as the author of the *Life of Thomas Chatterton* (1930) and the benefactor of the Thomas Chatterton Lecture given annually at the British Academy. He gifted his copy of the Tibbles' *Life of Clare* to Green-Armytage two years after its publication, writing in ink on its front free endpaper, 'R. N. Green-Armytage / from / E. H. W. Meyerstein / Oct. 1934'. The recipient has pencilled a confirmation on the front pastedown: 'Pres. copy from / E.H.W. Meyerstein / the poet & / novelist'. A note from Meyerstein is attached to the back of the front free endpaper, and a further postcard from him is loosely tucked into the book. The note reads:

This is my copy. Pray accept it. I have made a note of all the Chatterton allusions. You are welcome to it. It's a book that always makes me feel degraded – because it has all the qualities that my Chatterton lacks – affect, lightness, verbal accuracy
E.H.W.M.

Green-Armytage, a lawyer and book collector who owned some Clare letters and edited a selection of Walter de la Mare's poems for Faber, has written in pencil on the verso of this: 'from / Meyerstein, Chatterton's / only worthy biographer'. His postcard reads:

Thank you for your card-letter to hand this morning. I am glad to know my Clare's Life is in good hands. Of course he has been monstrously over-praised. But does that not always happen when a writer falls into the hands of a clique? He is a watercolourist, a Peter de Wint of poetry; but he has little or no fire, & I can't find much music in him. The paper for Nov. 20 is done; I time it to take not quite 55 minutes. I hope you will be at

the wreath laying at Bristol. I have never felt so friendless as now, except perhaps as a private soldier in Cork Barracks just 20 years ago. I am trying to write some short stories. Kind thoughts to Adrian. E.H.W.M.

And on the verso:

In case any of your party are in town a Suite á l'Ecrivain by Gotch is being played at St Martins in the Fields at 3 on Saturday afternoon (13) other items Handels Water Music & B[eethoven's] 8th Symphony. admission free.

The 'paper for Nov. 20' and wreath-laying refer to anniversary activities on Thomas Chatterton's birthday, 20th November. A *Suite for Pianoforte Solo* by Oliver Horsley Gotch had been privately published by the composer and dedicated 'to my friend E. H. W. Meyerstein', and Gotch had also set some of Meyerstein's poems in his *Eleven Songs for Pianoforte* (1930). Notwithstanding this evidence of at least one kindred spirit, Meyerstein's feeling of friendlessness, and the self-laceration in his praise for the Tibbles, are symptomatic of his lifelong tendencies to isolation and depression. The note about the London concert also evidences his passion for classical music, a field he reviewed for the magazine *Music Survey*. It is a shame this music-lover could find little music in Clare; the shortage of 'fire', however, may reflect the fact that many of Clare's fieriest poems, such as *The Parish* and 'The Badger' and 'The Lament of Swordy Well', were not yet in the public domain.

The book itself is almost unmarked, but there is a pencilled addition to the index, in Meyerstein's hand, at the end of the entry for J.L. Cherry's *Life and Remains of John Clare*: '278 (Chatterton)', and a marginal pencil line on page 278 marks the following passage:

Perhaps, as Cherry suggested, he had Chatterton in mind; he had been reading his poetry again in September, 1824, and the Journal entry for the 14th of that month gives some point to the suggestion.

There are also—to offer a CSI-style detail—a few shreds of tobacco in the gully between pages 42 and 43 of the book, which contain the longest passage on Chatterton.

Meyerstein's thoughts on Clare rather remind one of Dickens's dismissive verdict, referred to in these pages not long ago by Bob Tristram ('What the Dickens', *JCSN*, 115: 6-7). But they are fairly characteristic of its author, whose *Life of Chatterton* sometimes makes sharp or jaundiced verdicts. Like Clare, Meyerstein was a member of the awkward squad—perhaps literally as well as metaphorically since the phrase means a soldier who marches out of

step: his unhappy time 'as a private soldier at Cork Barracks' during the Great War was as brief and ineffectual as Clare's militia service during the Napoleonic invasion scare, and Meyerstein was discharged from the Royal Dublin Fusiliers as 'not likely to become an efficient soldier'.

His dark comment about Clare being monstrously over-praised by a 'clique' presumably alludes to the enthusiastic recovery work of Edmund Blunden and others, and suggests this gifted but insecure writer's bitterness towards authors more evidently successful and well-connected than himself. Like Frederick Martin (and indeed many Clare and Chatterton devotees) Meyerstein felt himself to be an outsider. But his characterisation of Clare as a 'watercolourist, a Peter de Wint of poetry' is thoughtfully apt, and his comments on the 'affect, lightness, verbal accuracy' of the Tibbles are generous in spirit.

He was simply wrong about his biography of Chatterton, which remains the most readable, sure-footed account of the marvellous boy's short life, though Meyerstein's poetry and fiction are now forgotten. Did he judge the Tibbles fairly? I think he probably did. There is an unhappy tendency in Clare scholarship to dismiss the work of earlier generations, and the Tibbles' reputation has suffered accordingly. But I am struck by how well their biography still reads. It always passes my own test: open it at any page and you learn something new and interesting. Meyerstein's demons may have clouded his judgement of himself and perhaps of Clare, but he knew a good biography when he read one while enjoying a smoke.

John Goodridge

(Grateful thanks to Sam Ward for additional research on Meyerstein, Green-Armytage and Gotch, and Greg Crossan for his corrections. Meyerstein is not in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, but has an interesting Wikipedia entry—quoted above on his military discharge—which gives further sources.)



Peter de Wint, *Landscape with cows and a barn.*

Evensong

A tortoiseshell butterfly,
woken too early, patters at a window,
flickeringly alive.

It says much more of life and death
than all the clichéd images
it beats its wings against.

It would be free, of course, and has no sense
of what's outside, the cold darkness
stretching into trees and hills.

I'm the one who sees the bleak out-there,
and fumble with a ritual
that's meant to take away the fear.

Mike Sharpe



Spring leaks through the clouds

Still cold, and a still gale blows from the south west,
Still required the woolly jumper and the thermal vest.
But, I rejoice, the sun's appeared amongst blue sky
As I hurriedly rushed out on a psycho-high.

The river's rising spate with brownish hue
Snakes through the valley, a stained and silted brew.
But, I'm not alone in this madding mood,
The sun's weak warmth inspires the birds to brood.

A mistlethrush on topmost branch on leaf bared tree
Blasts out his clarion notes, promotes his territory.
And the mallard – early breeders – are already paired
Whilst loyal and loving swans are for family prepared.

Our welcome immigrants, the egrets so refined,
Pure white and statuesque rise from the ditch they've dined.
Then way above, two buzzards sweep the sky.
Demonstrating their love, a winged ballet set on high.

Once murdered, made extinct, they've now returned.
Mankind, to some degree, conserves, a lesson learned?
And finally, a shock, an unexpected sight,
The blackthorn-sloe, its buds, an early bursting white.

And now this early Spring-like day fades away,
Returned the blanket cloud and feelings fey.

Pete Relph



Thomas Bewick, *Thristle Thrush*.

The Clare Session at the MLA Annual Convention in Vancouver, B. C. Friday, January 9, 2015.

On a chilly Friday morning at the beginning of January, a small group of scholars and specialists on Clare came together at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association in Vancouver, B. C. for a panel session entitled 'John Clare: Vanishings'. The topic proved fruitful as well as multi-faceted: Simon Kovesi, Professor and Head of English at Oxford Brookes University and editor of the *John Clare Society Journal*, delivered a provocative talk suggesting that the idea of 'loss' (loss of homes, people, birds, flowers, locales, and even the self) may be as important in Clare studies as the topic of 'place'. Seth Reno, assistant professor of English at Auburn University Montgomery, spoke movingly about the implications of Clare's love for the environment—a love that, he suggests, may prompt the erasure of self and subjectivity in his poetry. Michael Nicholson, a graduate student at UCLA and a fellow at the William Andrews Clark Memorial Library, presented a paper that similarly questioned the subjectivity behind many of Clare's poems, generating a reading of Clare's first person voice (his 'I') as an itinerant and often alienated persona—quite different from the one we might conventionally associate with the lyric. All three talks converged on the notion of Clare as a poet who was as interested in erasing the self as he was in creating; each pointed to Clare not only as a poet of nature and places but one whose idiosyncratic forms of 'vanishing' have continuing relevance in wider academic discourse—historical inquiries as well as new studies of the lyric.

Erica McAlpine



Simon Kövesi and Ron Ingamells at the Oxford Conference.

Poems That Make Grown Men Cry, Edited by Anthony and Ben Holden

This is easily the most interesting and distinctive anthology of poetry I have come across in recent years. When I was buying it my daughter said 'Dad, you don't need that'. Fortunately for once I ignored this advice.

A hundred men selected words that move them. I am not sure why only men, but I understand that there may be a later publication about poems that move women. The result is a collection of poems chosen for very personal, often painful, reasons. Some were chosen because of personal loss; some because of 'what might have been'; others because of sad memories and hurt; some because they were reminders of beauty. In the introduction to his choice of Dylan Thomas's 'Do not go gentle into that goodnight' Benjamin Zephaniah writes: 'I haven't talked to a therapist about this, but there may be something here about his [Thomas] having a kind of love for his father that I never had for mine'.

I discovered many poems which were new to me but perhaps they are not to the readers of this newsletter. Patrick Stewart chooses 'God's World' by Edna St Vincent Millay (1892-1950). Such a beautiful short poem. Harold Bloom selects Hart Crane's sad poem searching for reassurance that he was still a poet, 'The Broken Tower'. Crane committed suicide at the age of 32. The powerful poem about the 'disappeared' people 'Injustice' by Pablo Neruda (1904-1973) is the choice of the Chilean poet Carlos Reyes-Manzo. Wendy Cope has described Clare's 'I am' as one of the saddest poems in the English language. This is the choice of Ken Loach who writes: 'This poem tells of a man reduced to nothingness – bereft, abandoned, beyond tears. The desperation of Clare's words leaves you weeping for all who share his plight'. Robert Fisk and Julian Fellows select the well-known poem by Christina Rossetti, 'Remember'. The poet most chosen is W.H.Auden.

Another good reason for buying this unusual anthology is that it is published by Amnesty International.

Ron Ingamells

Something New

How varying is the taste of man
Still eager to pursue
That ever pleasing novelty
In meeting something new

In infancy the rage begins
(So tempting is the view)
Babes throw aside their once love'd things
To sigh for something new

The hoop today which boys are seen
So eager to pursue
To morrow lies a toy despis'd
Exchange'd for something new

Young miss's (if not catch'd in time)
- Be lovers ere so true
Grow fickle tires & turns `em off
To seek for something new

Old maids whom every hope forsakes
The self same end pursue
& put their wrinkl'd mouths in form
To look for something new

John Clare, *Early Poems*, vol. 1, p.13.



Thomas Bewick. *Boys sailing toy boats on river.*

Something New (After John Clare)

How varying is the tastes of humankind
Still eager to pursue
That ever pleasing novelty
In buying something new

In the beginning the envy begins
(So tempting is the review)
They cast aside their once-loved icons
And sigh for something new

The model today which photographers have seen
So eager to pursue
Tomorrow lies a camera despised
Exchanged for something new

New camera gear (if not bought in time)
Be loved ones ere so true
They grow fickle, obsolete & turns them off
To seek for something new

Old cameras who every hope forsakes
The self same end pursue
And they put their old icons aside
And sigh for something new

Peter Moyses



At Westminster Abbey last May.
Ronald Blythe, Linda Curry (videoing), Peter Moyses (without camera).

Joseph Skipsey: Selected Poems, edited by R.K.R. Thornton, C. Harrison, and W.D. McCumskey, 2014, Rectory Press.

This is a second edition, limited to 100 copies, and has been completely revised, with biographical notes supplied by Chris Harrison, Skipsey's great-great-grandson. The book contains a short biography, and a selection of poetry from Joseph Skipsey (1832–1903), who was, like Clare, a labouring poet and writer of ballads (a pitman from the North East of England).

Skipsey's 'formal education' was cut short when, at the age of seven, he was sent to work down the mines (up to sixteen hours a day). He then proceeded to teach himself, snatching spare moments in the pit and discarded printed papers, until at fifteen he had progressed to his uncle's copy of *Paradise Lost*. From there, he moved on to other classics, and writing his own poetry. There are many such parallels with Clare, and the book is an interesting read. To give you a taste of the poetry, here is 'The Stars are Twinkling'.

The stars are twinkling in the sky,
As to the pit I go;
I think not of the sheen on high,
But of the gloom below.
Not rest or peace, but toil and strife,
Do there the soul enthrall;
And turn the precious cup of life
Into a cup of gall.

Our 2015 Festival programme contains an article by Chris Harrison. He is also planning to contribute some music to the Friday evening folk session in the Blue Bell, and will be giving the Saturday night concert in St Botolph's Church.

The book is £10 +P&P and is available from R K R Thornton at Rectory Press, 2 Rectory Terrace, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne NE3 1XY – email rkthornton@btinternet.com.

Linda J Curry

Clare on Radio 4

One of the more substantial items about Clare to be broadcast recently was a programme in the Great Lives series, Radio 4 on Friday, 8 May at 23.30, when Wendy Cope talked about the poet. It is still available to listen to online: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05stkqz>

Malcolm Guite at Buckden

I had the privilege of organising the Good Friday Service in the parish of Buckden this year. We began in the Roman Catholic Church then processed in silence to the Parish Church and then to the Methodist church. In each church we sang the traditional hymns but the highlight was the much appreciated reading of Malcolm Guite's 'Stations of the Cross'. Members will remember his visit to the Festival a few years ago. Since then he has become more and more recognised for his fine and powerful poetry.

Ron Ingamells

Friends of the Festival 2015

I would like to draw your attention to the Friends of the Festival letter and form enclosed. This is a great way to support the Society (whether you attend the Festival or not). For the £8 donation you receive a free programme and poetry trail (worth £5.50). The programme contains articles relating to Clare and so is not just a Festival timetable.

Linda J Curry



Statue of John Clare at the cottage.

MEMBERSHIP

Renewal of Membership

The JCS membership year goes from 1 July to 30 June, and includes the *Journal* which is available at the Festival in Helpston or which will be posted to you if you are unable to collect it.

In our continuing efforts to keep costs and subscriptions down, we ask that if you would like a membership card please send a stamped self-addressed envelope with your renewal form. *You will receive electronic copies of the newsletters (by email) unless you tick the box on the membership form not wishing this.* You will therefore need to keep us informed of any change of email address. We would also be grateful if you would consider completing the Gift Aid Form if you are eligible, to keep our records up to date.

You may renew your annual subscription at the Festival, but otherwise please complete the form which comes as a separate attachment and send it with your cheque to me as soon as possible.

Many thanks.

Sue Holgate, Membership Secretary

New Members

The following have joined since the last Newsletter:

Paul Dove from Flitwick, Bedford

Mrs. J.M. Mortimer from Beckenham

Mrs. Eunice King from Royston

Mrs Janet Bayliss from Peterborough

Mrs Vally Miller from Matlock

Mr and Mrs David Barton from Radcliffe on Trent

Mr Ellis Hall from Cambridge

Prof Bridget Somekh from Cambridge