



# The John Clare & Society

Newsletter no. 136

June 2019



## **THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY**

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## **ERIC ROBINSON 1924 – 2019: a personal reflection**

It was around twelve years ago in the Primary School in Helpston on the Saturday of the John Clare Society Festival. As part of the Committee of the Society, I was on the look-out for those who seemed to be alone, and who might be in need of some direction. An elderly gentleman I did not know came into the room blinking from the strong sunlight, looking a bit lost. I pounced on him: 'It's so good to see you, sir,' I stammered. 'Can I be of any help?' Little did I realise that this would be the start of more than a decade of stories, laughter, meticulous study and the prompting of John Clare publications of my own.

So this must be the famous Professor Robinson of whom I had heard so much! Working with him in the Clare Archives in Peterborough Central Library, I was reminded more than once of the considerable difficulties Eric and his team had faced over years of meticulous study in all the various Clare Archives – a study that is still not complete. Asking him recently how long he considered it would be before the Clare manuscripts had given up all their secrets, he replied after some thought, 'Decades and decades, my friend.'

Four or five summers ago, we were sitting opposite one another in the Clare Archive in Peterborough Central Library, when after a particularly intricate piece of pencilled text had been deciphered, Eric looked up, with that mischievous twinkle in his eye and said, 'Roger, you're not much of a scholar, are you?' My heart sank. He looked me straight in the eye: 'More of a gifted amateur, I'd say.'

Having taught in three countries (the UK, Nigeria and USA) and having been married three times (to Rosemary, Joan, then Victoria in 1990), Eric had a full life to draw on when writing his own poetry. The prose-poems from his WWII Navy service – in



the North Atlantic on the Murmansk Run – are social history in themselves, with fewer and fewer first-hand witnesses remaining.

Eric always cared about language – about using simple, strong words without a lot of jargon. He remained grateful for his education at King Edward's School in Birmingham, and at Cambridge University. The editing and publishing of John Clare's vast output was his primary passion in life, of course. Amongst his large published output, the magisterial Oxford University Press 'Clarendon' nine-volume edition of Clare's poetry stands as a lasting memorial to Eric and his investigative team. There is hardly an English Faculty across the universities that is not graced by its hefty presence.

Eric, however, was a man of many interests. For example, his teaching and publications in the field of history of technology earned him the Leonardo Da Vinci Medal, the highest scholarly award given by the Society for the History of Science and Technology.

Speaking 'the word' – whether lecturing in class, teaching privately or proclaiming the Gospel in church – was also important to him. Teasing out the meaning of a 'hardly possible to read' Clare word was a passion of over sixty years, and contained many, many surprises. More than anything else I will miss that mischievous smile. A great Clarean – he was a Vice-President of the John Clare Society – and friend.

Finally, a short extract from 'The Mistake', one of Eric's Clare-related poems. The full version appeared in the Newsletter for February 2017:

I say to him, 'It is impossible for any man,  
Any scholar, any machine to transcribe  
Anything without ever making a mistake.  
Humankind is imperfect. That is our nature,  
And God intended that we should be so.'

The original, written by the poet himself,  
Inspired by God, is also imperfect.  
Trying to be true to the inspiration  
Is only trying. I cross something out,  
Because it is not true to God's inspiration.

I say that the goose is 'waddling'  
Instead of 'gadding', because 'gadding'  
Is overdoing it. It's banal;  
And the alliteration is unnecessary.  
When I read it again the word seemed  
To be 'gilladdling'. 'What brilliance!'  
I said to myself, and the alliteration  
So true to the 'geese'. I was amazed  
By the poet's inventiveness.

And it took me some time to retreat  
From such genius to the mundane.

**Roger Rowe  
Victoria Robinson**

## Notice of ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the John Clare Society will take place on Saturday 13 July 2019 at 10.15 a.m. in St Botolph's Church, Helpston. All members and those attending the Festival are cordially invited.



## Birds and Words

Friday 12 – Sunday 14 July

Helpston, near Peterborough

Unfortunately Simon Bysse, our new Chair of the Festival, resigned several months ago and so I have once again taken on the mantle for this year. The theme of the Festival 2019 is 'Birds and Words'. The children from John Clare Primary School use our theme to help them write their poems for the annual Poetry Competition – and very good the poems usually are. This year, as well as having a smart medal (donated by the late Peter Moyse), they will receive a short booklet of poems as a prize in each age category. The prize-giving will take place after the Midsummer Cushions ceremony on **Friday 12 July starting at 1.30 p.m.** at the church.

In the evening there is the usual folk music session at the Bluebell pub starting about **8.30 p.m.** Do come along and enjoy an impromptu concert given by Mike Shaw and Mike Swingler amongst others.

### Saturday 13 July

Coffee and tea will be available at the Bluebell from **9.30 a.m.** and in the Cottage from **10.00 a.m.** Botolph's Barn and the Scout Hut will be open at **9.30 a.m.** with various stalls to include book stalls, and two local artists will be displaying their work upstairs in the Barn.

There will be a Welcome Tent on the Village Green where you can buy a programme and concert tickets and a number of Craft and Sales stalls are going to be in the Scout Hut, just down the road from the Car Park. The Membership Stall will all be in the church. The Beauvale Ensemble recorder group are again playing for us in the Cottage and there is some Morris Dancing and Folk Dancing during the lunch break. There are also many things going on in the village during the afternoon. We have produced a lovely souvenir programme with full details of the weekend and some very interesting extra articles.

The AGM will start at **10.15 a.m.** to be followed by our President's Address given by Carry Akroyd. Lunches are available at the Village Hall and the Bluebell and the Annakinn Gallery will be open as usual.

In the afternoon our Annual Lecture will be given by Dr. Mina Gorji who will speak on the way birds soar through Clare's poetry and how he movingly captures them in his work. Mina is Deputy Director of the Centre for John Clare Studies at the University of Cambridge. There will be many activities in the village during the afternoon including our regular poetry reading in the church.

In the early evening our concert will be given this year by Pennyless Folk Group. Tickets will be on sale at the Festival for £6.00.

### **Sunday 14 July**

There will be the usual Clare-related church service starting at **11.00 a.m.** and also on Sunday morning John Stafford will give an illustrated talk entitled 'A Portrait – A Beginner's Guide to John Clare' in the Scout Hut. This is aimed at those who would like to know a little more about Clare and his life and tickets are available over the weekend. There is a walk through Clare countryside in the early afternoon finishing off with tea at the Cottage and details of this will be on the website nearer the time.

So it is a busy and interesting weekend – it would be lovely to see you there, especially if you have not been before. I am sure you will enjoy the festivities and meet some fellow Clare enthusiasts. Let's hope the sun shines on us!

**Sue Holgate, Festival Coordinator**

### **FRIENDS OF THE FESTIVAL, 2019**

We don't make an admission charge for the Festival; instead we run the Friends scheme as a way of defraying some of the expenses. This year Friends will get a 24-page programme containing interesting Clare-related articles and poems, a poetry pack, and those who also buy tickets for the concert (the ever-popular band Pennyless) will get priority booking and reserved seats.

We are also holding an event on Sunday morning – 'A Beginner's Guide to John Clare' and you can book tickets for this on the Friends' form if you wish. All this for just £10.00. Even if you are not able to come to the Festival, you might like to subscribe in the order to receive the programme and poetry pack.

The support we receive via this scheme is greatly appreciated, and if you can Gift Aid it that is even better. Please consider subscribing, and we look forward to seeing you at the Festival.

The application form is included with this newsletter.

**Valerie Pedlar**

### **VISITORS TO HELPSTON**

If you would like to come to the Festival for more than one day, or if you are travelling a long distance to visit Helpston at any time, you will find the Stamford Tourist Information Centre a helpful, but sometimes overlooked, source of hotel and bed-and-breakfast listings. In particular, this website is very useful:  
<https://www.bedandbreakfasts.co.uk/stamford-tourist-information-centre/>

**Stephen Sullivan**

## BIRDS NESTING: The Lost Clare Manuscript, PET A47

On 1 July 2019, I plan to publish the whole of the text of the lost Clare manuscript, the 14th in my 'Arbour Editions' Chapbook series. The Peterborough Manuscript A47 contained the original text of Clare's long poem 'Birds Nesting'. Over 600 lines of little-known Clare text, and as far as I am aware, never published in a popular format.

What happened to the manuscript? We do not know, nor when exactly it disappeared. What we do know, however, is that it was loaned to an unnamed individual by a senior member of the Peterborough Museum Society, and subsequently left in a railway compartment between Peterborough and Cambridge. Was it swept away as waste-paper or is it still being hoarded by some miserly soul?

We owe Eric Robinson a great debt as, if he had not struggled to copy the poem fifty years ago, it would only have survived in fragments and in unsatisfactory copies by earlier hands. Of course, it is possible that Eric made mistakes, but

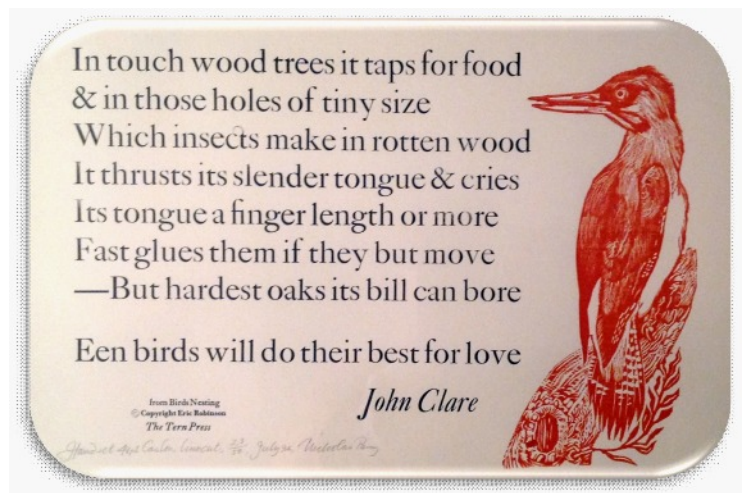
comparisons can easily be made with readings made in the 1930s by the Tibbles, and readers can judge for themselves. Perhaps one day the original manuscript will surface again, but in the meantime it is a real privilege to bring Eric's transcription to the public eye in this little volume.

A spirit of young adventure permeates the texture of Clare's verse as the reader is brought to join hands with the eager schoolboys scouring the fields and woods around Helpston in the search for birds and their nests. Clare came to denounce bird-nesting as a hobby, but the excitement of this early pursuit filled his mind and heart with the recollection of those heady days at the turn of the nineteenth century.

Those boys, unlike the materialistic farming society that was growing up in Clare's neighbourhood as he wrote, looked for birds' nests as eagerly as others for money, although a penny in the street would have seemed a fortune to them. In their chase they wander miles from their homes, 'out of their knowledge' as Clare wrote elsewhere, and even faced the fears of the dark, of the hobgoblins, ghosts and witches, with which, in their village minds, they were surrounded.

With eager haste & wonder struck  
Pursued as by a dreaded spell  
Till home – O could I write a book  
I thought what wonders I could tell  
& when again I left the town  
To the worlds end I thought Id go  
& oer the brink just peep adown  
To see the mighty depths below (lines 139-146)

For those familiar with 'The Nightingale's Nest' this long poem has much the same feel. We are accompanying our friend John as he guides us in our search.



and this reader realised afresh that Clare really meant it when he says 'So happy at my heart to day / That from the world I wish to live' (lines 533-4).

It has been a joy to type this text from Eric's fifty-year-old notes, it is fitting that book will be dedicated to his memory. It will cost just £4.

The Black cap is a singing bird  
A nightingale in melody  
Last March in 'Open wood' I heard  
One sing that quite astonished me  
I took it for the Nightingale  
It 'sweet jugged' just the same as he  
So creeping through the mossy rail  
I in the thicket got to see (lines 49-56)

**Roger Rowe**

## **FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY**

Thank you to those members who have already renewed their subscriptions for 2019 – 2020, using the renewal form that was mistakenly sent out with the printed version of the February Newsletter. Your membership will be valid until 1 July 2020 and we will try to ensure that you do not receive another renewal form in the meanwhile.

Otherwise, please note the renewal form in this Newsletter. Subscriptions remain the same for 2019 – 2020, and please make sure that you tick the box indicating that you are happy for us to keep your data for membership purposes. Those who are attending the Festival in July can, of course, renew their membership then.

One of our members has indicated that she finds the small print of the Newsletter difficult to read. It would be most helpful if any other members who experience the same problem could contact me by post, e-mail or telephone. My contact details can be found on the inside front cover of the Newsletter. If there is sufficient demand, it may be possible to produce some Newsletters in larger print.

We should like to welcome the following new members, who have joined the Society since the last issue of the Newsletter:

Peter Woollard, Tunbridge Wells  
Joy Webb, Cynwy Elfed, Carmarthen  
Stuart E Crooks, Hagworthingham, Lincs  
Jens Peters, Osnabrück, Germany

**Robert Heyes, Membership Secretary**

## **BBC RADIO PROGRAMMES ON CLARE**

The John Clare Society website (<https://johnclaresociety.wordpress.com>) has recently drawn attention to the fact that many BBC radio programmes on Clare are once again available, from BBC online. If you go to our Society's website you can click the links to go directly to the programmes:

BBC World Service (1991) 'Omnibus: John Clare'

Ted Hughes reads John Clare's 'Nightingale's Nest', Westminster Abbey (1993)

BBC Radio 4 Programme (2004) 'Open Country'

BBC Radio 4 Programme (2008) 'John Clare: The Lament of Swordy Well'

BBC Radio 4 Programme (2018) 'In Our Time: John Clare'

BBC Radio 4 (2015) 'Great Lives: John Clare'

## **JOHN CLARE SALES**

You will see the return of the 'John Clare Sales Order Form' in this Newsletter.

I am pleased to have taken over the sales-side from Mavis and Peter Leverington and offer my thanks for their enthusiasm for their years of selling. I look forward to meeting everyone at the Clare Festival Sales stand to continue their work. In the meantime look at the order form and get back to me with any requirements, or suggestions for next time!

**David Smith**

## **ALLIANCE OF LITERARY SOCIETIES**

As you know, the John Clare Society is a member of the ALS. This is just a reminder that, if you have an idle moment, you might want to visit their website at <https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com>. It really does have some interesting stuff: past copies of the journal, along with newsletters, etc. There is also a Calendar (on the Events page) which is full of literary events and festivals which you might be interested in.

**Linda J Curry**

## **'THAT PLACE OF PRIME': Clare's Vision of Childhood**

(This article refers to the poem 'Childhood', pp. 101-115 in Jonathan Bate's 2003 selection. Clare wrote another poem with the same title when an inmate in Northampton Asylum.)

Clare begins not with childhood, but 'the past', 'a magic word / Too beautiful to last'. The theme of the opening seven stanzas is that the past is a place of joy but is gone for ever – 'Time broke it like his glass.' These stanzas are imbued with images of cold, gloom and the withering of foliage. However, another of these mournful images, 'a broken toy', is a catalyst to change the mood because it 'recollects / Our memories into joy.' This process of re-collecting, of gathering the broken fragments of memory, leads Clare out of melancholy reflection and into a review of 'that place of prime,' childhood.

At once we are in a different world. The mournful, alienated adult is replaced by a group of relentlessly active children, running, leaping, climbing, shooting arrows, walking on stilts. Some of these energetic games are distinctly mischievous, with the parish church as a focus. They climb the church porch to carve names and graffiti on the guttering, as well as throwing stones at the weathercock. The children's imaginations are as vigorous as their bodies. Shells become thrones for monarchs, pebbles do for money, stones for marbles:

The mallow seed became a cheese  
The henbanes loaves of bread  
A burdock leaf our table cloth.

Their imaginations are clearly stimulated by nursery rhymes and folk tales:

We bawled to beetles as they ran  
That their children were all gone,  
Their houses down and door key hid  
Beneath the golden stone.

This world of childhood is entirely sociable. All the activities are collective; there is no 'I', only 'we'. Clare also avoids all geographical detail. There is no Swordy Well, Paddock's Nook or 'old Crossberry Way', those names that chime sadly in his various laments for lost joys. His focus is entirely on the immersive, unreflecting life of the children: 'we leapt ... we stalked ... we shot ... we urged.' They live in the present, thinking of neither the past nor the future, and seem to be insulated from discomfort:

In winter too we traced the fields  
And still felt summer joys  
We sought our hips and felt no cold –  
Cold never came to boys.

Clare manages the transition to the poem's final section with great skill. Understandably, it is the subject of school that brings the change of mood, with the sight of the birch-whip and the children's negative responses to their 'hornbook':

We tore the little pictures out  
Less fond of books than play.

Like the broken toy in the seventh stanza, the hornbook marks a moment of transition. It quickly transforms into a metaphor:

I love in childhood's little book  
To read its lessons through.

Already we sense a distancing effect: to read in childhood's book is different from describing childhood directly. The following lines contain some echoes of Wordsworth's 'Intimations of Immortality', giving us the sense that Clare has moved from immersive description to reflection filtered through the medium of literary analogues.

Clare's theme in this final section of the poem is alienation, summed up in the disturbing phrase 'I grow a stranger to myself'. His observation of nature is as sharp as ever – 'the firetail on the orchard wall ... the broad tree in the spinney hedge' – but he can no longer respond to the world around him in the instinctive, unthinking manner of a child. Everything in nature seems to renew itself and therefore seems unchanging, in contrast to the poet's own sense of change and ageing:

These all remain as then they were  
And are not changed a day,  
And the ivy's crown as near to green  
As mine is unto grey.

As the poem moves to a close, even this sense of nature's renewal cannot be maintained:

The fairest summer sinks in shade  
The sweetest blossom dies,  
The play breaks up, the blossom fades  
And childhood disappears.

This is the last reference to childhood. By the last stanza, childhood has again been swallowed up in 'the past.'

It might be tempting to treat 'Childhood' as a document of social history, a compendium of children's games around the year 1800, but it is much more than that. The poem traces the movement of the writer's mind as he enters the world of childhood memories and reluctantly leaves it again. Like Coleridge's 'Frost at Midnight' and the 'spots of time' in Wordsworth's *Prelude*, it considers the place of childhood in human life and the distance between the child's world and that of the adult. It is one of the poems that place Clare in the great tradition of English poetry.

**David Stokes**

## **TWO ROADS CONVERGE: John Clare and Edward Thomas Study Day**

This event, jointly organised by the John Clare Society and the Edward Thomas Society, is planned for **Saturday 21 September 2019** at Helpston. During the day we want to explore points of convergence in the lives, concerns and work of two of Britain's best-loved poets.

At the time of writing, there are still some tickets available for this event, full details of which were given in the last Newsletter, together with an application form. Further details, including more application forms, are available from Linda Curry or Noel Crack, and you should contact them soon to express an interest or reserve one of the remaining places.

Linda Curry: [ljc1049@gmail.com](mailto:ljc1049@gmail.com)  
Noel Crack: [f.n.crack@gmail.com](mailto:f.n.crack@gmail.com)

## THE DEPICTION OF BIRDS IN JOHN CLARE

In 1825, John Clare agreed to assist Elizabeth Kent in writing a complete history of British birds, promising to lend her 'all the information about birds' that he had collected over his time watching them in the countryside surrounding his native Helpston. The sense of the naturalist's desire to document and understand his surroundings is manifest in Clare's 'watching the habits & coming of spring birds', a sense of discovery and exploration perhaps suggested in his desire to give Miss Kent 'an account of such as are not very well known in books'.<sup>1</sup> This interest in scientific observation and documentation, most notably in Clare's lyrical and detailed poetic descriptions of birdlife, is central to the way in which he distinguishes himself from the nature poetry that immediately preceded him, and displaces him slightly from the trajectory of the Romantic poetry by which he was influenced. Though Clare was sceptical of the colonial naturalism that fawned over 'carcasses in glass cases',<sup>2</sup> ultimately his self-fashioning as a poet – specifically as a working class, rural poet, knowingly separated from the urbane intelligentsia of literary London – is bound up with his poetic objectives being symbiotic with his objectives as a naturalist.

Clare, despite contestations that he was not so comprehensively educated as his contemporaries, was keenly aware of his poetic precedents in the field of nature writing – his poetry, especially in his earlier work, is often both thematically and structurally referential to pastoral tradition in an open and self-conscious way (his own interpretation of 'The Shepherd's Calendar', for example, in its very title nods directly to Spenser). He begins 'The Robin's Nest' with the apostrophic invocation 'Come luscious spring',<sup>3</sup> a literary archaism that would not be out of place in a poem written a hundred and fifty years beforehand (indeed, Lady Mary Wroth's 'Sonnet XIX', published in 1621, begins with the metrically identical 'Come darkest night'.<sup>4</sup> Clare's preoccupation, too, with shepherding and rural workmanship must owe much to the similar thematic concerns of renaissance pastorals; in poems like 'A Sunday with Shepherds and Herdboys', the rhyming couplets of heavily metered iambic tetrameter make knowing reference to the poem's derivation from Spenser<sup>5</sup> – he does for the most part, as Seamus Heaney suggests, 'operate within the range of an official literary tradition' of nature writing.<sup>6</sup> This is true of Clare's adoption of the more recent poetic conventions of his contemporaries, too. With Wordsworthian inflection, his musings on the English countryside are often linked to personal nostalgia and are tinged with sentimentalism; in 'The Mores', the landscape invites a recollection of a 'sweet vision of [his] boyish hours',<sup>7</sup> while his quiet observation of the birds in 'The Robin's Nest' affords him the tranquility to 'be [himself] in memory once again'.<sup>8</sup>

These moments of Romantic projection of the poetic ego are, however, not the focus of Clare's poetry, and his poetic preoccupation with birds is perhaps the most vivid example of how his writing differs from that of the more traditionally canonical Romantics. In the bird poetry of Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats, the basic behavioural patterns of British bird species are used as signifiers for the internalised philosophies of the speaker, or figures onto which the poet can attach elaborately structured metaphors. In Shelley's 'To a Sky-Lark', the speaker wonders of the songbird 'What thou art we know not; / What is most like thee?', at once sublimating the skylark's identity as a bird and opening up the

following four stanzas of strained similes in which Shelley attempts to endow the bird with new identities, most significantly as 'a Poet'.<sup>9</sup> The poem, therefore, is not a poem truly *about* a skylark, since the bird purely functions as a poetic symbol that represents the poet's desire to access the kind of 'unpremeditated art' that he identifies birdsong as exemplifying. Equally, in Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale', the nightingale is depicted in relation to the speaker's mental process, such that its existence external to the speaker is thrown into doubt – the bird itself seems to 'fade away' and 'dissolve' to the point where it could be 'a vision, or a waking dream' rather than something actual;<sup>10</sup> the nightingale inhabits a 'faery land' divorced from reality, a parallel with the 'unsubstantial, faery place' of Wordsworth's cuckoo in 'To the Cuckoo'.<sup>11</sup>

For these poets, the observation of the natural world serves as a reflection of their inner selves, to the extent where the existence of the physical reality of that world is sublimated by the projection of the poetic ego. In Clare, nature does provide an object upon which to project the personal, but is also itself an object of personality, with its 'riddles' and 'endless new lessons' to teach the observer.<sup>12</sup> Where Keats uses the nightingale as a an abstract and symbolic representation of a turbulent mind, Clare packs his 'The Nightingale's Nest' with detailed observation – of how the bird's 'wings tremble' and 'feathers stand on end' during song, and that 'seeded wood grass' or 'on the ground' are the most likely venues to locate the nightingale's 'secret nest' (he notes, carefully, that 'no other bird / Uses such loose materials' to construct its home). The nightingale of Clare's poem is itself a subject, rather than a symbolic extension of the speaker; indeed, the poem draws attention to the fact that the nightingale flees from 'man's haunts' and that the bird exists entirely separate to humanity save for the occasional 'wanderer' who happens across it. A similar contrast occurs between Clare's 'The Sky Lark' and Shelley's poem; while Shelley binds the skylark's identity up with his own identity as poet, Clare separates the human subjects of the poem from the bird, who 'smile and fancy and pass along' in 'unheeding' ignorance of the lark that 'lies safely' in its 'low nest'. For Clare, the birds are not poetic instruments through which to explore the human condition, but rather deserving of their own descriptions which can be contrasted with the human experience.

Clare was well aware of the extent to which his handling of his subject matter differed from the other Romantics – he notes derisively how 'Londoners are very fond of talking about [nightingales] and I believe fancy every bird they hear after sunset a Nightingale', possibly even directly mocking Keats, whose entire life had been spent in the city.<sup>13</sup> He describes, in a rare satirical moment, how he came across a young couple in Hackney 'lavishing praises on the beautiful song of the nightingale which happened to be a thrush', seeming to relate the lack of understanding of nature to the verbose pretentiousness implied by 'lavishing praises', and implicitly mocking those high-minded poets who make poetic subjects of birds that they know nothing about. For Clare, accuracy of description of nature is supremely important, especially when nature carries the spiritual weight of perfection – he desires that when 'the poets indulg[e] in fancys', the 'matter of fact men the Naturalists' should not allow their ill-observed myth-making to be taken as observed fact.<sup>14</sup> His attention to observed detail is manifest in his extensive field notes drawn from his documentation of bird behaviour witnessed by him in the countryside around his home. Though he sometimes describes, with the sparse dryness of notation, mundane biological

details of the birds he watches (for example, how he 'found', upon 'minute observation', that the pettichap (or chiffchaff) lays nine or ten eggs)<sup>15</sup> he tends to eschew these 'bookish descriptions' in favour of a poetic expression of his findings that is both accurate and lyrical. Thus Clare's field notes often read like prose poems, in which his descriptions, such as that of the kestrel as 'the species that hangs in the air on trembling wings and is a beautiful object in the blue sky of a summers day', appear as considered in their poeticism while remaining essentially descriptive.<sup>16</sup>

Though Clare is now often praised for his fidelity of representation, after his poetry began to flag in sales his publisher, John Taylor, began to pressure him to 'Speak of the appearances of Nature ... more Philosophically' in order to bring his sales in line with the more pontificating Romantic poets.<sup>17</sup> Despite this, pressure to conform to the conventional poetic representation of what James McKusick calls the 'internalised Romantic quest',<sup>18</sup> which was compounded by literary reviews labelling Clare as 'strictly a descriptive poet', seems to have had little impact on the poetic preoccupations of Clare over the course of his career.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, the charge of Clare's poetry being purely descriptive, apart from being untrue in that many poems have philosophical preoccupations, also minimises the extent to which Clare's attentive description broke new ground linguistically. The representation of birdsong through phoenetics, for example, had few precedents, and also implicitly raises complex questions over the relationship between human and natural utterances. In 'The Cuckoo', Clare voices the cuckoo's call as 'Cuck cuck', and then describes how

mocking boys  
Crie 'Cuck' and then it stutters more  
Till quite forgot its own sweet voice  
It seems to know itself no more<sup>20</sup>

Not only does Clare 'mock' the cuckoo's song by transcribing it into the English alphabet, but he also engages with the idea that this human appropriation of natural sound, like the shouting boys, is corrupting in its undermining the perfection of the natural identity – he both pushes the boundaries of poetic representation and discusses the philosophical implications of it. This display of simultaneous descriptive precision and invention is key to Clare's poetic identity, and the ways in which he engages with language; the transcription of birdsong is one way in which his 'enthusiastic involvement with particularity' manifests.<sup>21</sup> Clare's depiction of the cuckoo's song, here, is fundamentally different from Wordsworth's in 'To the Cuckoo', in which the 'wandering voice' of the bird serves as a poetic figure that reflects the 'wandering' of the speaker himself. While Wordsworth's cuckoo is 'never seen' and remains 'unsubstantial', Clare carefully depicts the bird as 'like a hawk in flight', and links the song necessarily to the animal with 'as she flies she sings'; in the phonetic transcription of the cuckoo's song into English, and the suggestion that it 'stutters', Clare makes clear that the cuckoo's song is real before it is figurative, while the absence of the actual bird in Wordsworth's poem leaves its voice as an abstract presence removed from a physical reality. In a sense, this divide mirrors Roland Barthes' conception of *pheno-song* and *geno-song*; while Wordsworth engages only with the intellectual idea of birdsong, Clare connects that idea with 'the body in the singing voice', the 'labour' which the bird goes through to produce its song.<sup>22</sup>

On this level, Clare's observed depiction of the natural world and the human world are underpinned by the same desire to be representational in the most veracious way. Clare's translation of, say, the nightingale's song into the essentially contentless but aurally exact 'jug jug jug' shares a poetic intention with his use of regional dialect and rustic tradition in his poetry;<sup>23</sup> he attempts to match lexis as closely as possible to his subject because his ultimate objective as poet is to 'look on' the world around him 'with a poetic feeling' that allows him to create lyrical descriptions 'that magnify the pleasure' of experiencing the environment he loves.<sup>24</sup> It is always difficult with Clare, whose background, as the son of a farm labourer, was strikingly humble (to the extent that inspired great intrigue at the time), to refrain from linking his poetic process to class – however, in his focus on precise description of the rural landscape and its wildlife he seems to run contrary to the learned poetic introspection and knowing artifice of the other Romantics; where Keats, Shelley and Wordsworth all observe themselves in nature, Clare observes nature itself.

**Leo Reich**  
**Queens' College, Cambridge**

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<sup>1</sup> *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Clarendon Press, 1985) pp.356, 374.

<sup>2</sup> Peterborough Museum MS A49, 44.

<sup>3</sup> *Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare*, ed. Robinson & Summerfield (OUP, 1967) p.91

<sup>4</sup> *The New Oxford Book of Seventeenth Century Verse*, ed. Alastair Fowler (OUP, 1991) p.230.

<sup>5</sup> *Selected Poems and Prose*, p.94

<sup>6</sup> 'John Clare: A bi-centenary lecture' in *John Clare in Context*, ed. Haughton, Phillips & Summerfield (CUP, 1994) p.132.

<sup>7</sup> *Poems of the Middle Period* vol.2, ed. Robinson, Powell & Dawson (Clarendon Press, 1996) p.348.

<sup>8</sup> *Selected Poems and Prose*, p.92

<sup>9</sup> *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Reiman & Powers (New Yprk, 1977) p.227

<sup>10</sup> *John Keats: The Major Works*, ed. Elizabeth Cook (OUP, 1990) p.285

<sup>11</sup> *A Choice of Wordsworth's Verse*, ed. RS Thomas (1971) p.85.

<sup>12</sup> Peterborough MS A49, 69.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 43.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*, 86.

<sup>16</sup> Peterborough MS A46, 163.

<sup>17</sup> *John Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (1973) p.197.

<sup>18</sup> 'Beyond the Visionary Company: John Clare's Resistance to Romanticism' in *John Clare in Context*, p.222

<sup>19</sup> *John Clare: The Critical Heritage*, p.68

<sup>20</sup> *John Clare's Birds*, ed. Robinson & Fitter (OUP, 1982) p.14.

<sup>21</sup> James McKusick, *John Clare in Context*, p.222.

<sup>22</sup> Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice' in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art and Representation*, tr. Richard Howard (Blackwell, 1986) p.267.

<sup>23</sup> *Selected Poems and Prose*, p.72

<sup>24</sup> Peterborough MS A49, 44.

## A VISIT TO JOHN CLARE BY JOHN DIX

*In 1852 a book was published with the title 'Pen and Ink Sketches of Authors and Authoresses'. The work is generally attributed to a John Dix; however it appears that the original sketches were in fact written by a friend of Dix, who gave them to him just before he died. Dix only gives his friend the name George M. and says that he had, in the past, been the editor 'of a newly started journal in the metropolis'. At the end of the introduction he writes:*

The substance of the manuscripts committed to my charge by M. will be found in the following pages. They have been slightly altered. In some instances, where blanks occurred, I have, from notes made immediately after my numerous interviews with him, supplied the deficiencies; but in no instance have I interfered with the staple matter of his articles.

*Now it has to be said that John Dix was not an altogether trustworthy character. Working on a newspaper in the West Country he had written some things about the young Bristol poet, Chatterton, that were certainly not true. Because of this, we must approach this account of his friend's visit and his description of John Clare with some caution.*

*However, the whole piece, which is entitled 'A Visit to John Clare' and runs to ten pages, has a real feeling of authenticity about it. The actual visit is described in the following extract:*

Happening not long since to be in the neighbourhood of his confinement, I determined to visit him.

Having obtained the requisite permission, I entered the building and was led by the keeper to that part of it in which the poor, insane poet was to be found. His malady was not of a nature which required his being confined to a cell, – and although his case was altogether hopeless, he was by no means insensible of what was passing around him. A glimpse even of the poetic feeling glimmered through the darkness of his soul.

Behind one of the wings of the asylum was a large kitchen and flower garden, and here I found John Clare at work, digging. From his resemblance to a portrait of him, which I had seen some years before, I knew him instantly. He was attired in agricultural habiliments and presented the appearance of a farmer's labourer. His figure was short, thickset, somewhat clumsy, and by no means prepossessing. His head, unusually large and out of proportion to his body, was set on a pair of broad shoulders, that had the bend which constant toil at the spade produces. The upper portion of his forehead bulged out considerably, and hung, pent-house-like, over the eyes which, large, grey and deeply set, were shaded by bushy brows; his nose was small, slightly turned up, and the mouth large and thick-lipped.

On approaching him, I accosted him by name, and held out my hand. He looked at me suspiciously for a minute or two, and then accepted the proffered salutation. Gradually we slid into conversation, and, throwing aside his spade, he walked with me around the garden.

Like the conversation of most madmen, that of Clare was coherent enough until the subject of books was broached. Then his hitherto dull eye blazed up wonderfully and he talked wildly. – Suddenly he stopped, grasped me by the arm, and dragged, rather than led me, to his room.

It was an apartment pleasantly situated, having a garden beneath the windows. There was a bird-cage, with a skylark in it, near the window; and pointing to the iron bars of his apartment, he smiled gloomily, and said in a strong provincial dialect, 'We are both of us bound birds, you see.'

He then sat down by a table, which was covered with books and newspapers, and entered into conversation, so rationally, that no one who heard him would have supposed him a fitting inmate of that mournful place. He told me long stories of his career as a poet, and showed me a few of his later productions; but alas! they were incoherent enough. He hoped, however, that he should get up a subscription list for another volume, and asked me to put down my name in a book that he kept. It was an easy way of pleasing him, and so I did as he requested. I then asked him for his autograph, and he wrote the following on a slip of paper. – Poor fellow! he was out again, in fancy, amongst the green fields and the woods:–

Oh! who can tell the sweets of May-day morn,  
To waken raptures in a feeling mind;  
When the gilt East unveils her dappled dawn,  
And the gay wood-lark has it's nest resigned,  
As slow the sun creeps up the hill behind;  
Morn reddening round, and daylight's spotless hue,  
As seemingly with rose and lily twined;  
While all the prospect round beams fair to view,  
Like a sweet opening flower, with its unsullied dew.

On my departure, he accompanied me to the garden, and resumed his work. The physician of the establishment told me I was fortunate in seeing him in a pleasant mood, for he generally was reserved and moody. A great many people called to see him, but in general he shut himself up in sullen loneliness, and could not be prevailed upon to show himself. On one occasion a person had smuggled spirits into his apartment, and had given him some, which had produced sad effects. Ever since he had craved for it....

The poor Northamptonshire peasant-poet, in the midst of all his mental gloom, exhibits a partiality for those volumes which in old times afforded him so much pleasure: whenever he is not engaged in the garden he is either reading or writing; happily he fancies that he still lives in the literary world; and very lately I was shown a letter to a distinguished authoress, in which he thanks her for her writings to him to meet a select circle of the *literati* and intimates his intention of joining it. Poor fellow! He is as dead to the society of his brother authors, as though the grave-stone covered him;– he already belongs to the past; but, as a faithful painter of rustic scenes and occupations – as a poet whose fancy was buoyant in the midst of labour and hardship, and whose energy was drawn directly from Nature, – his name will survive when that of many a more aspiring author will be forgotten.

*It is interesting to note that the poem quoted above, 'Oh! Who can tell the sweets of May-day morn', is listed by David Powell in his book, First Publications of John Clare's Poems (2004) as first appearing in print in John Dix's book. I feel that this must add to the authenticity of the whole account.*

**Noel Crack**

# WALKING WITH JOHN CLARE

The asylum towers made him feel small  
As if peering up to a teacher  
The ivy climbed over the crumbling wall  
And appeared to him a strange, green creature.

The afternoon sun did nothing to calm  
The turmoil inside his head  
He stared at the sun beetle held in his palm  
And wished he could go to bed.

Escape! ... was tonight or never  
The forgotten ladder left by the garden wall  
He was about to sever  
The line between nothing ... or all!

Only the full moon saw his flight  
As the bracken deadened his fall  
One more poor soul into the night  
One less soul at morning call.

He stole past the iron gates  
Encased by the red-bricked posts  
If only he could shake off the weights  
That left him prey to the ghosts.

The forest was uninviting  
As he weaved between the trees  
The black of night was blighting  
He fell crying to his knees.

The lights were on in the tower  
Was his midnight dash discovered?  
Was this to be the hour  
His homeward quest was smothered?

It was a false alarm  
His understudy had worked well  
The stuffed suit, like a scarecrow on a farm,  
Had fooled the warning bell.

He rose to his feet and looked around  
And stared into the dark  
The girl of his dreams must be found  
That first love that made its mark.

The moon was covered by clouds  
How he longed for the sunrise  
That would wake him and diminish the funeral shrouds  
And his children's stoney eyes.

He came upon a cornfield  
A restful sea of gold  
Whose harvest would never be milled  
Unless his heart was sold.

Crossing the fields he sneered  
At the damned fences  
Every day he neared  
The thirst that never quenches.

He arrived at his hamlet by dawn  
After his nighttime rove  
Exhausted, clothes well worn  
For his first love, he strove.

He hammered on the oak door  
'I want my white breasted dove  
I can't stand it anymore  
I want my long lost love.'

The frightened farmer pulled him inside  
Bloody footprints on the farmhouse floor  
'Is that you, John Clare; I can't decide  
Have you survived some terrible war?

'I have come for Mary Joyce  
She needs me now I know  
But I cannot hear her voice  
Bring her to me and I'll go.'

'John, John; she was lost in a fire  
Only three years ago  
She was your hearts' desire  
And you're the last to know.'

'Then there's nothing left for me  
Even my lifetime love has gone  
A prisoner; never to be free  
I'm like a drying river where dwells a dying swan.'

'They've taken the pastures; they've taken the fields  
For their wealth expansion  
Who knows what the land yields  
From their manorial mansion?'

The farmer sat him down to rest  
And offered bread and ham  
'Are you really John Clare or do you jest?'  
'No! John Clare; I am.'

**Gary Soden**

*'I've been writing poetry ever since childhood. I'm 63 years old and discovered John Clare's poetry about 30 years ago. I was filled with a sense of wonder when I read 'I am' for the first time.*

*I found it hard to believe that someone in an asylum could write something so powerful, particularly the last few lines when he captures the security of childhood.*

*I embarked on three major walks with my son in 2008, 2009 and 2010. They were: Hadrian's Wall, the South Downs Way and the Cotswold Way respectively. So when I learnt that John Clare had walked 90 miles in 4 days to escape the High Beech asylum in Epping Forest back to his former home I was inspired to write a poem.'*

## CENTRE FOR JOHN CLARE STUDIES 26 & 27 Feb. 2019

Tuesday 26 February was one of the lunchtime sessions where an invited speaker gives a short paper on aspects of John Clare. In the boardroom of the English Faculty, West Road, Cambridge, the group heard a paper from Professor Stephanie Kuduk Weiner (Wesleyan) titled: 'At home in the working countryside: Clare's metaphysics of agricultural labour'.

Very briefly: The discussion was that Clare wrote of rural life and scenery, but especially on human interaction in nature, whether work, 'play' or co-existing. He also drew from a range of traditions of popular culture and folk song. Most particularly, he respected and wanted respect for all agricultural labours, the activity and the person. The work was hard and poorly rewarded: 'Labour was a burden they were unable to escape'. Clare covered most of the local 'labouring' agricultural activities in his poems, using personal experience or his close observation.

It was pointed out that he frequently wrote songs or rhythms that could be sung – especially when working or walking. Singing or whistling was a normal accompaniment to working. Clare used nature as a powerful and persistent antidote to hard labour for his readers; rarely spoke of 'exhaustion' but often of weariness and the 'joy' of returning home.

The following day, Wednesday 27 February, there was a symposium on the theme: 'John Clare and Song: Exploring the relationship between Clare's poetry, song and music'. This was held in the Judith E Wilson Theatre in the English Faculty building. There were two papers before lunch and a third in the afternoon, which included live musical illustrations of points made. That was followed by a music set from the 'Black Smock Band' and a final open discussion. Papers were as follows:

Prof. Stephanie Kuduk Weiner (Wesleyan) -

'Lend an ear, lend an ear: song form and modes in Clare's poetry'

Clearly, Poetry relates to music when read! Or rather, especially, in the case of Clare. The theme of song and ballad was shown through Clare's work with his interest in folk music and song around him. Much of his poetry can be read as song. Repetition acts as refrain, lines offer variation and interpretation for singing. Folk-Song was a formative part of his childhood, indeed throughout his life, so it seems natural that it would thread all through his poetry.

Prof. Kirsteen McCue (Glasgow) -

'Sweet the Merry Bells ring round: Clare's songs for the drawing room'.

Clare's writing songs for various markets and performance was compared with James Hogg and Robert Burns (whom he much admired) and their success compared to Clare's attempts, explaining reasons why he was less successful. At this period Clare was trying to get songs published. Some did get into print as music as well as printed in his own collections such as *The Village Minstrel* and *A Midsummer Cushion*. He was frequently discouraged by his publisher and close friends. We learnt that there was a missed encounter that might have had a positive outcome for Clare publishing songs. After WW1 and the 'rediscovery' of Clare, there were (are) as many as a hundred settings of Clare's words to music. His songs are still recorded by new artists and in new ways.

Prof. Derek Scott (Leeds)

'John Clare the pioneering folk-music collector'.

An entertaining presentation on period and place of collection. Clare (with some 300 songs) is one of the earliest collectors of folk-music, one of the first to capture live performances 'in the field' and notate music accurately. (Maybe only 17 of these but highly accurate when compared to printed versions of the period.) He collected purely within his local area, which today gives us a picture of the styles and distance travelled by some music, whether folk or 'classical'.

We heard that there was no big distinction between folk-song and broadsides, comic songs, or those more seriously composed for the drawing room. All might be sung in the drawing room as entertainment and any might filter to a rural pub from city and country-house via musicians of any kind, in any direction and in a short space of time.

The Black Smock Band, introduced by Polly Paulusma (UEA), had helped to illustrate Derek Scott's session and now played a selection of eight tunes, reels, jigs and songs, some with words, the most memorable being 'A Faithless Shepherd' with words noted by John Clare. This was a traditional song that his mother used to sing and he wrote down the words. He also added numerous extra verses to those he 'collected'. Example of the four-verse song below:

A faithless shepherd courted me,  
He stole away my liberty.  
When my poor heart was strange to men,  
He came and smiled and stole it then.

When my apron would hang low,  
Me he sought through frost and snow.  
When it puckered up with shame,  
And I sought him, he never came.

When summer brought no fears to fright,  
He came to guard me every night.  
When winter nights did darkly prove,  
None came to guard me or to love.

I wish, I wish, but all in vain,  
I wish I was a maid again.  
A maid again I cannot be,  
O when will green grass cover me?

A short tea-break followed, full of conversation, and a final ninety minutes of 'round-table discussion' chaired by Dr. Sara Lodge (St Andrews). There was a summing up of the day's key threads, the thoughts and evolution of Clare and the period in which he was working.

Overall we learned that poem and song were almost interchangeable in the years 1820-50, 'nostalgia' being the emotion most evoked. Songs were thriving but you had to have or to make the right connections to succeed. The sense of nostalgia or doubt was fed by the huge changes in living and working conditions since the turn of the century in rural areas after enclosure and in the increasingly industrialized urban and city areas. Questions had been scattered

through the individual papers but both audience and 'performers' had many a question and discussion that came from the day to add further avenues for thought.

**David Smith**

The Centre for John Clare Studies continues to organise discussions and meetings in Cambridge, and all those with an interest in John Clare are welcomed. Meetings can be announced or details changed at very short notice, and the website is not regularly updated. It is recommended that you should register with them at [cjcs@english.cam.ac.uk](mailto:cjcs@english.cam.ac.uk).



## **OCTOBER: Just Walking**

At a turn of the lane where trees  
leave space to let the distance in,  
fields and clustered woodland  
shape the far-away

I reach it like a known surprise,  
revising expanded light,  
the open-minded sky that has no inwardness.

It's not illusory, this sense of space  
nor its inherent calm  
and, though it may be less than truth,  
its stillness can diffuse a sorrow  
or absorb a joy.

**Mike Sharpe**

**THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY**

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**JUNE 2019**



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