The John Clare Society

Newsletter no. 138 February 2020

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EDITORIAL

This year, and with a special new cover design from Carry Akroyd, we celebrate the bicentenary of the publication of John Clare's first book of verse, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery.* Clare's book was an immediate success and went quickly to four editions, out-selling Keats's first volume of poems and catapaulting Clare into the London literary scene. Of course, we know now that this success was not to last, but at the time it must have felt to Clare that his dream was becoming true.

There are still discoveries to be made about the relationship between Clare and his publisher, John Taylor. In particular, it would be useful to know more about the financial side of things. Was publication by Taylor the best possible thing that could have happened to Clare? Or did Clare fall victim to some kind of patronising financial scheme that felt to him like robbery? Readers will find both points of view urged in this *Newsletter*. Possibly it was some sort of complicated mixture of the two things. In any case, their publishing world was a cut-throat kind of place, where working class writers, and women writers of any class, were likely (from our point of view) to be taken advantage of; we are reminded that Jane Austen's publisher gave her £10 for the copyright of what became *Northanger Abbey*, and then failed to publish it, so that she needed to buy the copyright back at a later date.

I should like to take this opportunity to thank the contributors to the Newsletter, in this issue and in previous issues; not least, I need to thank for their patience those whose contributions have been 'held over', sometimes for more than one issue. But all contributions likely to be of interest to readers of John Clare are welcomed, whether handwritten or in electronic format. Please get in touch with me if I can advise or help in any way.

Stephen Sullivan

MEMBERSHIP

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

Helen Bowmaker, Mansfield
Susan Harper, Hay-on-Wye
John Clare Trust, Helpston
Benedict Mackay, Bedminster, Bristol
Hazel Thompson, Hitchin

Robert Heyes, Membership Secretary

TWO 200th ANNIVERSARIES

Just over two centuries ago, John Clare, a simple agricultural labourer and limekiln worker, was deeply embroiled with the dark and beautiful Patty Turner, the young woman who was to become his wife. For around two years they had been 'courting', a word that is not adequate to describe his relationship with Patty, which judged by the content of much of his work at this time, was likely of a sexual nature almost from the beginning. What did Clare intend? Certainly not marriage, as an itinerant worker in the local limekiln with little income and no home to call his own.

However, over these two years, Clare's poetic output had greatly blossomed. As he recorded himself:

> Casterton cowpasture which I used to pass thro on my visits to Patty very frequently was a very favourite spot and I pland and wrote some of my best poems among its solitudes the cut of her face always delighted me more then any other & had I never seen her my attempts at poetry woud never have been resumd after my removal at Casterton

He penned a huge number of works over this period, many of which describe his ongoing entanglement with the 'Maid of Walkherd' in the most intimate way imaginable. Much of this vast output never saw the light of day for a century and a half because of its sensuous nature, but some of these works were destined to be part of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, published in January 1820.

In the autumn of 1819 at the genesis of this momentous venture for John, he was in a real quandary: should he reject the now pregnant Patty, or stand by her? He records his troubled mind in two poems, in the first of which he roundly blames her; closely followed by the second, in which he pours scorn upon himself, 'luckless amorous Johny', saying he would stand by her forever. They married in St. Peter and St. Paul's parish church in Bridge Casterton on 16th March 1820.

At the same time as all this heart-searching by Clare, his publisher must have been very uncertain of how to place this young man's poems for the book market. I believe it was at this point that John Taylor came up with the idea of an unsung poetic hero, a Peasant Poet, whose grasp of proper English was so debased that much of his work had to be improved upon for the largely Upper and Middle Class book-buying public.

That Taylor was successful in his bowdlerisation of Clare's raw material is obvious in the vast success that the book's publication received. It was an immediate sensation; edition following edition in quick succession. Here are a few of the comments made at the time:

From 'A Lady'

Oh! take this little volume to thy care –
And be the friend of Genius and of Clare!
There Nature's dictates, unadorn'd by art,
He sweetly tells; and powerful, doth impart
Those moral precepts – in such simple strain
We read – we wonder – and respect the swain.
Hail! native genius! bred in lowly vale,
May'st thou be cherish'd by a fostering gale.
(30 January 1820)

From 'A well-wisher to Merit'

'And let me first ask, where is the man possessing the least share of taste, a liberal mind, and good feelings, who could peruse the little volume in question, without experiencing an anxious desire to snatch its deserving author from the impending misery that even still menaces him? I shall now, then, without further preamble, venture to suggest that which appears to me well calculated to second your noble and benevolent intentions in favour of this surely heaven-born Poet.'

(11 February 1820)

A friend to a deserving genius (anon)

'... he unconsciously, and with the simplicity of a child, unfolds such a power of intellect, such a purity, and such a fund of moral rectitude, as would do honour to human nature, however dignified by rank and title might be the happy possessor.'

(24 May 1820)

From the *Quarterly Review*

'He looks abroad with the eye of a poet, and with the minuteness of a naturalist, but the intelligence which he gains is always referred to the heart; it is thus that the falling leaves become admonishers and friends, the idlest weed has its resemblance in his own lowly lot, and the opening primrose of spring suggests the promise that his own long winter of neglect and obscurity will yet be succeeded by a summer's sun of happier fortune.

'The volume, we believe, scarcely contains a poem in which this process is not adopted; nor one in which imagination is excited without some corresponding tone of tenderness, or morality.'

(May 1820)

Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery passed rapidly through three editions, but several of Clare's influential friends took exception to some of the passages in these first editions on the ground that they were rather too outspoken. Lord Radstock, in particular, strongly urged the omission in subsequent editions of several lines which he characterized as 'Radical slang'. Clare contested both points for some time, but Lord Radstock threatened to disown him if he declined to oblige his patrons, and the poet and publisher at length made the desired concessions in the editions following. Here is the main passage over which his lordship wished to exercise censorship:

Accursed wealth oer bounding human laws
Of every evil thou remains the cause
Victims of want those wretches such as me
Too truly lay their wretchedness to thee
Thou art the bar that keeps from being fed
& thine our loss of labour & of bread
Thou art the cause that levels every tree
& woods bow down to clear a way for thee

So subsequent editions of *Poems Descriptive* were further bowdlerised, much to Clare's dismay:

> Being very much botherd latley I must trouble you to leave out the 8 lines in 'helpstone' beginning 'Accursed wealth' …
>
> (Letter from JC to Taylor dated 16th May 1820)

Poems Descriptive continued to sell in large numbers, but the words 'Accursed Wealth' echo down the generations for any student of Clare, whether an academic or simply a reader of the great poet's work. Right from the early poems that have come down to us, we find in Clare an honesty that is sometimes painful to observe.

There is an additional thread to Clare's dispute with his backers 200 years ago. We all know that here was a man born in grinding poverty, but few realise that he was roundly cheated by his publishers of much of his earnings:

> & tho I know I am cheated such is the cunning of avarice that like the tricks of a conjuror it defies detection

It is hardly surprising that Clare was personally affronted by the actions of those who should have been acting on his behalf. As he appended to one 'financial' statement from Drury and Taylor:

> How can this be? I never sold the poems for any price – what money I had was given me on account of profits to be received but here it seems I have got nothing and am brought in minus twenty pounds of which I never received a sixpence – or it seems that by the sale of these four thousand copies I have lost that much – and Drury told me that 5,000 copies had been printed tho 4,000 only are accounted for.

Clare had not benefitted by these sales by a single penny. However, the publication of *Poems Descriptive* in January 1820 did introduce an unique and gifted voice to the reading public of his time. Without John Taylor, who accepted the obvious risk of publishing an unknown poet from the labouring classes, it is unlikely that any of us would know and love the genius that was and is, John Clare, nor be able to read his poetic response to the dramatic transformations in the society of his time.

Clare provides an eye-witness account of the impact these changes had on the people who were their victims, so reading Clare will give you a very good idea of what the ordinary labourer thought. Why not remind yourself of his early poetic gifts by reading again *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*?

Roger Rowe

DVDs OF INTEREST

Many members of the John Clare Society are admirers of the writings of our former President, Ronald Blythe, and particularly of his best-known work, *Akenfield*. They might like to know that Sir Peter Hall's famous interpretation of that work, made in the early 1970s, is now available on DVD from the British Film Institute.

Another DVD which might be of interest is the BBC's 1994 serialisation of *Middlemarch*. While it does no more than hint at the qualities of George Eliot's masterpiece, it is a very worthwhile piece of work. It is particularly valuable for those with an interest in John Clare because most of the location filming was done in and around Stamford. Since the novel is set in the 1820s, it gives a very good impression of what Stamford was like in that decade, when Clare was a frequent visitor to his friends in the town. The DVD seems to be no longer available from the BBC Shop, but there are plenty of copies on eBay.

Robert Heyes

BY THE WAY – A ROW OF TREES

I don't know their species, or their origin
which may be abroad
but there are they, standing in a row
the twelve, of a kind, orderly
as if in orchestration
keeping the roadside firm
with a grip on life, more than our own
deeply embedded, with blind root
seeking earth's sweet food

and in the upper space
by surface roadway's
arterial flow
down old durham road
strengthening the verge

they play a grand role
but are simply unaware
humility's flower
they of growing stature
dark limbed, upwards reaching
fed on air and sunrays
embracing the world and life

Bob Kelly 14.3.19

EDWARD STOREY MEMORIAL CONCERT
Peterborough School,
Sunday 17 November 2019

Pauline and I were proud to represent the John Clare Society at a concert in memory of Edward Storey, co-founder and Vice-President of our society. Edward is particularly remembered as a local Fenland writer and poet, and the large attendance on this afternoon reflected this. The concert was introduced and compered by Angela Storey, Edward's widow, who had also been the headmistress of Peterborough School at the time when she and Edward married in the early 1980's, and which was to be their home until retirement some twenty years ago.

The concert took the form of readings from Edward's poems interspersed with music played on violin, oboe and piano, featuring selections from Handel, Beethoven, Chopin, Schubert and settings of Clare's sonnets by Ralph Vaughan Williams. The three musicians were of a particularly high standard, especially the pianist who is now an internationally acclaimed performer, and whose career began as a teacher at the same school several decades ago. All three gave their services for free, contributing to an enjoyable and truly memorable occasion, a fitting tribute to a remarkable man.

Rodney Lines

QUAINT RHYMES: John Clare & Thomas Tusser

John Clare was an avid reader but admits in chapter 9 of his 'Autobiography' that he 'never coud plod through every book....I dip into it here & there & if it does not suit I lay it down & seldom take it up again'. One book where he did more than just 'plod through' was by Thomas Tusser. In 'The Cottager' Clare tells of the old man's

> corner cupboard by the wall
> [where] His books are laid – tho good in number small
> His Bible first in place....
> And prime old Tusser in his homely trim
> The first of Bards in all the world with him
> And only poet which his leisure knows
> – Verse deals in fancy so he sticks to prose

Thomas Tusser was born in the reign of Henry VIII in 1524 and, near penniless, died in London c. 1580. He had been briefly in the service of William Paget, who served Henry, Edward VI and Mary.

It is likely that Thomas had been a singer at Edward VI's court. As a very young child he was 'pressed' into one of the many collegiate choirs – a very common practice. The choirmaster at St.Paul's even had the authority to 'take up such apt and meek children as are most fit to be instructed in the art and science of music and singing, as may be found...within any place of our realm'. Anyone not acceding to this 'will answer for doing the contrary at your peril'. Thomas was at one time a chorister at St.Paul's. After St.Paul's he had gone to Eton, then to King's College, Cambridge, and Trinity Hall. In an article of 1888 about that college, Tusser is listed with alumni – 'remarkable men' – including bishops and various aristocrats.

Apparently disliking court life, he left and went to Suffolk, taking up farming for the first time. It was during this time that he wrote *A Hundreth Good Pointes of Husbandrie*, which was published in 1557. A new edition, *Five Hundred Points...* appeared in 1573, enlarged with a section on 'Good Huswiferie'. Many editions were to follow, and it was the one published in 1812, edited by Rev. William Mavor, that Clare owned. In addition to the reference in 'The Cottager' cited above, Clare mentions Tusser in his 'Journal' and also in a very amusing prose story, 'The Farmer and the Vicar'. The farmer insists on the superiority of Tusser, who wrote in English, over Horace, whose works the Vicar had quoted in Latin!

The 'Journal' entry for Sunday, 14 November 1824 is full of interest. It begins: 'Read in old Tusser with whose quaint ryhmes I have often been entertained.....' Clare comments on Tusser the poet: he 'seems to have been acquainted with most of the old measures now in fashion', and adds: 'there is two pretty sonnets in Tusser and some natural images scattered about the book', citing four lines from one of the poems:

> The year I compare as I find for a truth
> The spring unto child hood the summer to youth
> The harvest to manhood the winter to age
> All quickly forgot as a play on a stage

The lines are from 'A Description of Time and The Year'. It is not surprising that Clare was drawn to this poem; Time was a theme that he often addressed. This is the third of four quatrains. Here is the rest of the poem:

> Of God to thy doings, a time there is sent,

Which endeth with time that in doing is spent:
For time is itself, but a time for a time,
Forgotten full soon, as the tune of a chime.

In Spring-time we rear, we do sow, and we plant;
In Summer get victuals, lest after we want.
In Harvest, we carry in corn*, and the fruit,
In Winter to spend, as we need of each suit.

Time past is forgotten, ere men be aware:
Time present is thought on, with wonderful care:
Time coming is feared, and therefore we save
Yet oft ere it comes, we be gone to the grave.

[* It was a delight to read this as I had recently come across a postcard a 10-year-old Devonshire boy had written to his younger brother in 1909, telling him that their grandfather had 'carried his field of wheat Monday...' Although as a young boy in the 1940s, I had spent some Augusts in a village close to theirs, I had never heard that evocative expression before.]

Christmas was memorably celebrated by Clare in *The Shepherd's Calendar* ['December'], as a season of family and community customs and traditions. By Clare's time, though, some were in decline and he wishes to preserve and celebrate them:

Old customs O I love the sound
However simple they may be
What ere wi time has sanction found
Is welcome and is dear to me
Pride grows above simplicity
And spurns it from her haughty mind
And soon the poets song will be
The only refuge they can find

Christmas likewise dominates the 'December' chapter in Tusser's *Five Hundred Points:*

Good husband and housewife, now chiefly be glad,
Things handsome to have, as they ought to be had.
They both do provide, against Christmas do come,
To welcome good neighbour, good cheer to have some.

Good bread and good drink, a good fire in the hall,
Brawn, pudding, and souse, and good mustard withall.

Beef, mutton, and pork, shred* pies of the best, [*mince pies]
Pig, veal, goose, and capon, and turkey well drest,
Cheese, apples and nuts, jolly carols to hear,
As then in the country, is counted good cheer.

What cost to good husband, is any of this
Good household provision only it is:
Of others the like, I do leave out a many,
That costeth the husbandman never a penny.

[The poem reappeared in the *Preston Herald* on Dec. 22nd 1908!]

Tusser was certainly hospitable (Something that Mavor suggests accounted for Tusser never becoming financially secure. There's a sad irony in learning that, when a new Safe Depository was built in Chancery Lane in the late 1870s, a wall mosaic at the entrance carried one of Tusser's maxims: 'Safe Bind; Safe Find' - to us 'better safe than sorry'!)

Tusser supported the tradition of marking key moments in the farming calendar with joint celebrations between tenant farmer and workers together, such as the end of 'wheat-sowing', all sharing the housewife's 'seed-cake, the pasties, and furmenty pot'. There were ploughmen's 'Feasting Days', and sheep-shearing was another occasion. In Northamptonshire, the farmer put on entertainment for the shearers and friends:

> Wife, make us a dinner, spare flesh neither corn,
> Make wafers and cakes, for our sheep must be shorn,
> At sheep-shearing, neighbours none other thing crave,
> But good cheer and welcome, like neighbours to have.

Tusser believed that the husband was 'the stay and support, and binder together of the household'. But he is equally certain of the importance of the wife's position. He connects the word 'wife' with 'weave' and 'woof'; the idea of weaving, 'by her influence and affection, heart to heart, the whole household into one'. [From a comment in the *Northumberland & Durham Advertiser,* March 1861.]

Sheep-shearing celebrations are described in John Clare's 'June'. You can almost taste it!

> How the hugh bowl was in the middle set
> At breakfast time as clippers yearly met
> Filld full of frumity where yearly swum
> The streaking sugar and the spotting plumb
> Which maids could never to the table bring
> Without one rising from the merry ring
> To lend a hand...

In 'Autobiographical Fragments', too:

> [T]hen came the she[e]p-[s]heerings were we sure of frumity from the old shepherds if we sought the clipping pens ah what a paradise begins with the ignorance of life and what a wilderness the knowledge of the world discloses....

Clare is also enthusiastic about occasions when social inequalities were put aside to celebrate together, but makes it clear that those customs were disappearing – just another consequence of enclosure, the creation of a 'new class' of farmer, intent on establishing his status. On the subject Clare is sharply cutting in 'The Parish':

> That good old fame that farmers earnd of yore
> That made as equals not as slaves the poor
> That good old fame did in two sparks expire
> A shooting coxcomb and a hunting Squire
> And their old mansions that was dignified
> With things far better than the pomp of pride
> At whose oak table that was plainly spread
> Each guest was welcomed and the poor was fed
> Were master son and serving man and clown
> Without distinction daily sat them them
> Were the bright rows of pewter by the wall

Se[r]ved all the pomp of kitchen or of hall
These all have vanished like a dream of good

The 'Journal' entry also refers to Tusser on the subject of 'inclosure':

he seems to have felt a taste for inclosures ... I am an advocate for open fields and I think that others experience confirms my opinion every day

It is a delicious understatement to have written 'felt a taste for'. Tusser was an unapologetic supporter of 'inclosure'! He was a tenant farmer, once in Suffolk and later in Essex. (At neither place was he particularly successful.) Tusser compares 'open fields' and 'enclosed country', 'much to the disadvantage of the former' [Mavor] in a long poem of over 170 lines, including:

The country enclosed I praise,
The t'other delighteth not me;
For nothing the wealth it does raise,
To such as inferior be.
How both of them partly I know,
Here somewhat I mind for to shew.

A verse from his depiction of the 'Champain', or 'open country':

There swine herd, that keepeth the hog,
There neatherd, with cow and his horn,
There shepherd, with whistle and dog,
Be fence to the meadow and corn.
There horse, being tied to a balk,
Is ready with thief for to walk.

He was not unaware of commoners' rights or of how they were being abused as enclosures were made:

The poor at enclosures do grutch,
Because of abuses that fall,
Lest some men should have but too much,
And some again nothing at all.
If order might therein be found;
What were to the severall ground?

Reading those lines brings to mind Clare's 'Lamentations of Round Oak Waters':

Ah cruel foes with plenty blest
So ankering after more
To lay the greens and pastures waste
Which proffited before

Tusser's views would have been totally opposite to Clare's, yet nowhere is Clare judgemental; he just simply states his opinion.

There is so much else in *Five Hundred Points* that would have entertained him. It is an instructional book, Tusser stating strong opinions, even coming across as dogmatic. There is a lot, however, that a gardener like John Clare would have related to. He had an orchard; Tusser has simple, practical advice about cultivating apples. Clare knew the importance of bees; Tusser has advice – including the proverb: 'A swarm in May / Is worth a load of hay'. New types of peas were appearing and beans were a common crop; from his 'February' chapter:

Plough in stubble, sow rounceval pease and beans, harrow in pease, pease and beans under-furrow, dung pasture.

They feature in Clare, so differently though:

The pea bloom glitters in the gems o'showers
And sweet the fragrance which the union yields
To battered footpaths crossing o'er the fields
[from 'The Bean Field'].

Another Tusser aphorism, 'It is an ill wind turns none to good', is just one of his references to weather, which was also a constant theme for Clare. Tusser mentions May showers and the rise in temperatures – and the rapid growth of weeds:

In May get a weed-hook, a crotch and a glove,
And weed out such weeds, as the corn doth not love.

There are suggestions on tree lopping, hedge-care and advice to woodcutters ; indeed, so much that would have had meaning for Clare and, no doubt, amusement.

Clare would have recognised that Tusser had lived and worked close to nature and related to it in ways that Clare understood and shared. But what did he make of 'camping'? Not tents and guy-ropes! Camping in East Anglia in Tusser's day was a ferocious form of football, often played for many hours. As early as 1475 a Norfolk clergyman had bequeathed a 'camping ground' as a place of exercise for parishioners. Tusser recommended that farmers should allow camping:

In meadow or pasture (to grow the more fine),
Let campers be camping in any of thine,
Which if you do suffer, when low is the spring,
You gain to yourself a commodious thing.

Apparently it would help settle the roots and also hold back the growth of moss. Clare wrote about many village games and pastimes, but camping does not appear to have survived!

Clare finally refers to Mavor's Glossary:

Some of the words in the glossary have different meanings with us – To addle means to earn wages – eddish with us is the grass that grows again after it is mown – staddle bottom of a stack etc etc etc

[The latter word was the subject of a letter in 1887. The Vicar of Yaxley (not far from Helpston) had written to the editor of the *East Anglian Daily Times* about that 'rare Suffolk word (used several times before Hadleigh magistrates)... spelt by Tusser *stradle* with one 'd'.' The vicar cited three definitions, adding that 'an old word should never be allowed to die for want of explanation, particularly if it be, as in this instance, a useful word.']

That the Glossary caught Clare's interest and that he made reference to Tusser's diction and word choices is not surprising when we recall the value Clare himself placed on 'old words'. The language as spoken and heard mattered to Clare. His poetry is rich and immediate because of that. His publisher, John Taylor, indicated a respect for Clare's use of dialect and unusual words (albeit, later, he was a critic and an exciser) and it was he who compiled the Glossary that accompanied Clare's first book. 'Useful words': struttle, crump, drowk, ickle, tittled, waffling, oddling – so many words that bring Clare and his world aurally alive to us.

Clare knew instinctively the effect of using a vernacular rather than a standard word. That on its own might suggest that *Five Hundred Points* was not one of the books that Clare had to 'plod through'. He might also have been drawn to these lines:

Some seek for wealth, I seek my health,
Some seek to please, I seek mine ease,
Some seek to save, I seek to have;
To live upright
More than to ride with pomp and pride.

[Tusser was referenced numerous times through the 19th century, and was anthologised here and in America, alongside such others as George Herbert, Walter Raleigh, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Bloomfield, Tannahill, Bamford and John Clare. Even into the 20th century Tusser citations continued, with poems reprinted in newspapers. In the *Birmingham Daily Post*, for instance, he is referenced in an article on pea-growing. That was in 1940! In 1909 an auctioneer's catalogue listed the Library mantelpiece in Melton Grange (E.Yorks), specifically mentioning the tiling – with scenes from Tusser's book. 'Tusser Close' is a name unique to Rivenhall, Essex, where he was born, but talk in the 1840s of erecting a memorial statue to him in Rivenhall or Chelmsford appear not to have got very far.]

References and Citations:

Thomas Tusser: *Five Hundred Good Points of Husbandry* (ed. Mavor 1812)
John Clare: By Himself (Carcanet/MidNag 1996)
John Clare: *The Parish* (Viking 1985)
John Clare: *Major Works*, (ed. Robinson & Powell, with Intro. by Tom Paulin, Oxford 2004)

Norman Goodman

PLOUGHMAN POET

Peter Russell

The pen lies quiet, the page remains untilled,
Gone now is poor mad John, his mind stilled,
Flown from that flat country is his fair word
His only journey on the rails homeward
That now divide the land enclosed and fettered –
His wits an unroof'd cott of words, rhyme, letters,
His body by hard seasons beaten and cursed:
Deep furrows his meter, lines scribed in earth,
Ploughman is one with poet and from his clods,
Through the nightingale's song and wagtail's nod,
Hedges and ditches, fields, briars and brakes,
A chain from soil to heaven he creates:
The world is in an ear of grain to glean -
His verse, 'songs like the grass are evergreen'.

PETER RUSSELL is a poet and translator who lives and works in Glasgow. He grew up in Hampshire and studied Comparative Literature and German at the Universities of East Anglia and Regensburg.
His work has won poetry prizes in Scotland and beyond, including a commendation in the Stephen Spender Prize for poetry in translation in 2106. He regularly reads his work at spoken word events and poetry festivals; his collection, Petragraphs*, is due to be published in 2019.*
His interest in John Clare comes from his reading and appreciation of Clare's poetry, and his interest in the history and literature of the Enclosures.

THE OTHER JOHN CLARES

The story of John Clare's life is both a triumph and a tragedy, but in one very important instance he was very lucky. The simple fact that his local bookseller in Stamford was related to the London publisher, John Taylor, had a profound effect upon the course and development of Clare's natural talent. Taylor was probably the best person in the country to introduce the young poet to the British public and to give his work the promotion that it required. The success of his first book, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (of which publication we are celebrating the bicentenary this year) owed much to Taylor's stressing of Clare's simple rural background, which in turn captured the imagination of the book-buying public. Four editions appeared in just over a year and brought almost instant fame to its author.

All of this interest had the effect of opening up Clare's world. Visits to London, interaction with some of the great literary figures of the day, gifts of books and financial backing all followed.

It is interesting to speculate what would have happened if this first collection had been published by a small, local bookseller, as many such efforts were. Would Clare's latent talent have been stimulated, or evolved in the way that it did, without this communication with poets and thinkers, or the considerable library that he was able to amass? I think that one has to admit that, on the whole, the poems contained in his first publication were not greatly superior to some of those found in similar publications of the time. The improvement in the quality and originality of Clare's writings is obvious in the years following his initial success, even through to those poems written in the asylum. The question is, would any of this have occurred without the success of *Poems Descriptive*, and his consequent, albeit short-lived, fame?

Pondering on this, I began to wonder how many other 'John Clares' there have been out there. These would be men and women with the innate intelligence and clarity of vision to express a profound truth about the world and our place in it, but who never had the connections or met the influences that would have enabled them to achieve their potential. My view is that there may have been many such individuals, and that 'our' John Clare stands for all of them. In spite of all the obstacles and with the help of this one stroke of good fortune, he was able to make the most of the opportunities and experiences that came his way and create some of the truest and most beautiful poetry ever written.

Noel Crack

Arbour Editions Chapbook No.15
O Woman Sweet Witchingly Woman

As you will have read elsewhere in this edition of the Society's Newsletter, January 2020 marks the 200th anniversary of the publication of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, Clare's first collection. Additionally, the 16th of March 2020 marks the 200th anniversary of John Clare's hasty marriage to Martha (Patty) Turner; she was, of course, six months pregnant at the time. Patty was 20 on the 3rd March and John 27 years of age the previous July. I have been planning for some years to mark the anniversary of their marriage in an appropriate way and this chapbook is the result.

In Clare's early work in particular, we find fine poems on subjects that he was 'encouraged' to repress to make them acceptable to a largely urban, upper and middle class, book-buying public. There is little doubt in my mind that Clare's poetic vision was somewhat more carnal than his publisher thought fitting. As Professor Robinson remarked: 'To survey the whole range of his poetry about Woman is to encounter a many-faceted, exhilarating, and erotic sensibility' (*Early Poems of John Clare*, p.xiv).

Two extracts might serve to better illustrate the sensual thought and imagery that Clare used, but which fell foul of the Taylor / Hessey editorial pen:

Make use of the season thoult never be younger
& spare me thy charms while thou hast em to spare
& throw thy old cloak by as usful no longer
But only old dames like thy mother to wear
& come in the groves wi thy shepherd to dantle
& oer thy soft bosom love nought pin or tie
Save a silk kerchief or white lawny mantle
Thro which thy white breas'es will heave on my eye
& there well seek seats were the leaves grow to close em
& there when Im wearyd wi playing wi thee
I sink down to sleep on thy white throbbing bosom
How sweet will my dreams on that soft pillow be
(Lines 13-24)

Song 'Old winters limpt off & left spring her enjoyment'
(Unpublished in Clare's lifetime)

This beautiful paean of praise, likely written for Martha (Patty) Turner, is a wonderful companion piece to the following poem, written just a few months later:

Tho lovly flower round thee the storm is brewing
& my once 'rosebuds' opening into ruin
When each leaf fades that gave such hopes of blooming
& sweets must blight that once wer so perfuming
& all dispoild by luckless armorous Johny
Who sung thee once so artless blythe & bonny
Thy beauty form whose songs so often tell on
Thy virtues praisd so much but 'flesh is failing'
Yet look thou up above thy coming sorrow
The tempest falls to day & clears to morrow
(Lines 1-10)

'To P------ Under a Cloud'
(Unpublished in Clare's lifetime)

The first seeks a rather more than innocent assignation with Patty and the second bemoans her fate now she has become pregnant. They married in March 1820 in Bridge Casterton, and she was safely delivered of Anna Maria on 2 June 1820.

Love is the manna youths fond heart esteems
The fairy music of lifes summer dreams
(Unpublished fragment)

So it seems clear that from the very beginning, many of Clare's poems were judged by his editor and publisher as too explicit in content for the mores of the day, and were severely cut or rejected. I have collected together some examples of these in *O Woman Sweet Witchingly Woman* for your interest and enjoyment.

Roger Rowe
arborfield@gmail.com

JOHN CLARE'S WINTER BIRDS

We often talk about just how much the natural world has changed since Clare's day. We have lost so many of the species that he wrote about, such as the polecat, redstart, nightjar and wryneck, and seen others reduce significantly in population, including nightingale, turtle dove and lapwing.

So it is reassuring to re-read some of Clare's poems about winter birds and reflect how little has changed in terms of the sights and sounds that he describes. And if you were to venture out at this time of the year you really could find yourself back in Clare's era. Take these lines from 'Emmonsails Heath in Winter', for instance:

I love to see the old heath's withered brake
Mingle its crimpled leaves with furze and ling
While the old heron from the lonely lake
Starts slow and flaps his melancholy wing
And oddling crow in idle motion swing
On the half rotten ash tree's topmost twig
Beside whose trunk the gipsey makes his bed
Up flies the bouncing woodcock from the brig
Where a black quagmire quakes beneath the tread
The fieldfare chatter in the whistling thorn
And for the awe round fields and closen rove
And coy bumbarrels twenty in a drove
Flit down the hedgerows in the frozen plain
And hang on little twigs and strat again

This really could be the description of a walk around the nature reserve at Castor Hanglands this December! Grey herons remain a relatively common species

in the modern John Clare Countryside and are often seen at dusk, calling deeply as they fly ponderously towards their nighttime roosts. And the sight of a crow swinging from the tops of the trees is a characteristic winter feature, although our concerns about the plight of nature creep in again at this point to reflect on the likely demise of our ash trees across the landscape in years to come as a result of ash die back.

Clare is at his best as an observer of nature when he describes the 'bouncing woodcock', as this rather plump and heavily camouflaged winter bird flies in a distinctive way, bouncing up from the wet grass and then zig-zagging away. Woodcock are relatively common winter visitors to the area and can often be seen feeding on fields in the dark, when car lights reflect from their eyes.

They were once a common sight and sound in the spring too, when several birds could be seen on their display flights over the woods until 15 years ago. Sadly, they have since disappeared as a breeding species, perhaps as a result of climate change or change to woodland vegetation because of increased browsing by deer. Clare does not record them as a breeding bird either, so perhaps there has always been a degree of change in the natural world around us, with species coming and going from time to time.

We do still however delight in the sight and sound of the fieldfare, who roam the winter countryside still, just as Clare describes them, searching for hawthorn berries and emitting their characteristic chuckling call. Flocks of several hundred of this winter thrush can be seen at Etton Maxey Pits and over the Hanglands.

And finally, the much loved 'coy bumbarrel' is, if anything, even more common today than it was in Clare's time. We know it as the long-tailed tit and many of the 21st century village residents will see them feeding in their gardens this winter, still coming in their 'droves' and 'flit[ting] down the hedgerows'. This is a tiny, largely black and white bird with a tail almost twice the length of its body and it suffers high mortality in hard weather. It seems to have benefitted from the generally warmer winters of recent years.

And so the message from Clare seems to be one of continuity – and of course encouragement to get out into that winter landscape and see nature for yourself. I hope all our readers take that advice to heart!

Richard Astle
Chairman
Langdyke Countryside Trust

John Clare: an anniversary celebration with Toby Jones

Oxford Brookes University, Headington Campus, Main Lecture Theatre, OX3 0BP
Sunday 2 February 2020, 6-7pm

It may still be possible by the time this Newsletter appears to obtain tickets (the event is free, but you must register in advance) for this evening of poetry and music celebrating Clare's life and work, with acclaimed actor Toby Jones, brand new music by composer Julian Philips and new poetry which responds to Clare's own words. The evening will feature a preview of extracts from an upcoming words-and-music theatrical production in London in April.

Further details and registration:
www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/john-clare-an-anniversary-celebration-with-toby-jones-tickets-75734657399

LOVE'S COLD RETURNING

John Clare's 1841 Odyssey from Essex to Northamptonshire

Ellis Hall & Bridget Somekh

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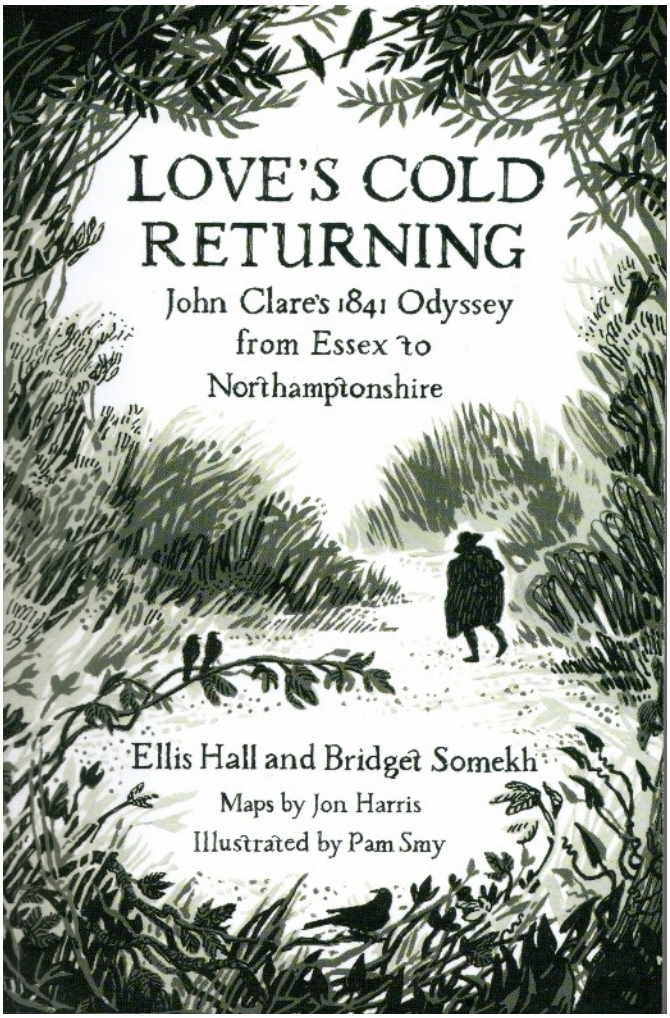

Ellis Hall and Bridget Somekh's unique and richly-rewarding book was launched on Friday November 15 at the intimate performance space at the Poetry Cafe in London, close by Drury Lane.

Coming in from a cold and wet evening, it was a pleasure to join a convivial, warmly-welcoming crowd, which included a good sprinkling of John Clare Society members. John Gallas, the New Zealand poet, so well-known here, opened the evening with an account of his own journey of 2016, following – or very nearly! – John Clare's Essex-Northants route. In the second-half of the evening, John read three of his poems which have close links to Clare.

Coming to the book itself, Bridget spoke of her and Ellis's fascination with the 'Journey out of Essex', and how they had set out on the project as 'our homage to John Clare' and 'our wish to get close to him'. Ellis followed, explaining that their collaboration on the project, which they estimated would take 'a year and a half', took five!

Throughout their joint contributions they read extracts from their own prose, musings and poetry; readings which were interspersed with generous and always pertinent quotations from John Clare's prose and poetry. These were read by Tony Lanfranchi, with subtle changes of tone and character, making Clare a very real presence .

An unforgettable launch of a book that, in a cover citation, Iain Sinclair expresses as 'a scrupulous and perhaps definitive reckoning'. Anyone with a love for John Clare will want *Love's Cold Returning*.

Norman Goodman

You can order *Love's Cold Returning* over the Internet at bit.ly/lovescold. The price is £20, plus postage at £3.90.

A LAMENT

'Tween Loughton Town and Abridge –
A green and pleasant land.
A goodly mix of arable crops
And meadows did abound.

The meadows were a treat to see,
Flowers bloomed amongst the grass.
Cattle grazed the lush herbage,
The milk they made – first class.

Then approached that awful day
When factory farms arrived.
Milk produced industrially,
The 'robotic' cows 'survived'.

Thousands imprisoned in great sheds,
Exercise nearly nought.
Fed additives, to udders swell
More milk production sought.

These big producers, profits gained,
Small farmers felt the pain.
Milk prices cut and lowly priced,
Their cows then sold – a shame!

So now the fields nigh monochrome,
The same crops year by year,
Rape and wheat and barley
Produced, a sight that's sear.

The meadows now, all under plough
The ascending larks are gone,
The flower delights abolished,
No song birds sing their song.

The hares that sported 'cross the marsh
Where the River Roding wends,
They box no more as spring arrives,
As Nature mourns these trends.

Where are the whitethroats in the hedge?
Where is the yellow bunting?
The Little Owl in ancient oak
Has left for better hunting.

Small farmers now, a dying breed,
Their farms, too small to pay,
The nouveau riche buy up the land,
The future's grim and grey!

by Pete Relph, July 2019.

JOHN CLARE & EDWARD THOMAS MEET AT HELPSTON

The weather was perfect and Helpston looked at its glorious best on September 21st, when members of the John Clare Society and of the Edward Thomas Fellowship came together for a study day entitled 'Two Roads Converge'. The event was held in Helpston Village Hall, and enjoyed by about seventy people, with each poet equally represented.

After a short opening speech by Carry Akroyd, the audience listened intently to three excellent and complementary talks on the lives, influences and output of Clare and Edward Thomas. The speakers, Dr Sam Ward, Dr Erica McAlpine and Dr Erin Lafford, pointed out the differences and similarities as well as the strengths in the work of both writers, and the audience responded with numerous questions at the end of each presentation. The presentations were themed around the idea of the 'journey': this, Sam Ward dealt with the 'life journeys' (biographies), Erica McAlpine with the relationship between the poets and their landscapes ('landscape journeys') and Erin Lafford with the way that both poets used words and language ('literary journeys').

About half of those who were present took part in an audience participation session at the beginning of the afternoon before the third talk, while others took the opportunity to visit the John Clare Cottage and explore the village. All of those who chose the audience participation session – and some chose it with some trepidation – seemed to enjoy the experience. We all selected a partner from the 'other side' and, with the help of prompt cards specially provided by David Kerslake, proceeded to discuss a selected poem, as well as our own favourites. Everyone seemed to engage with enthusiasm, so much so that when, at the halfway point, David asked if we wished to change partners, it was promptly and universally stated that we wished to continue as we were, since we had much more to say to each other. This part of the day had been suggested by David as something of an experiment, and I feel it was a great success as it certainly had the effect of bringing people together.

The same can be said of the day as a whole. The Village Hall proved to be a very good venue, with all facilities close to hand. The kitchen made it possible for us to provide refreshments, a very useful stage meant that there was no problem in seeing the speakers and, with comfortable seats, an effective sound system and room for each Society to run a shop, it was excellent. The day ended with expressions of thanks to all involved, from Jeremy Mitchell of the Edward Thomas Fellowship and Mike Meacham of the John Clare Society.

I should myself also like to express my own appreciation for the help that I received in organising the day: to Linda Curry for taking and sending on the bookings, to Sue Holgate and Ann Marshall for providing the refreshments, to Anna Kinnaird for ensuring, through Milton Estates, that we had adequate parking space, and to Clair Wordsworth for overseeing this. Finally, I would like to say how much I have enjoyed working with David Kershaw over the last two years, putting the day together. The whole event has certainly shown us what it is possible for the John Clare Society to accomplish in Helpston.

Noel Crack

JOURNEYS TO CLARE AND THOMAS

This was an excellent Study Day, a return to Helpston in beautiful sunshine; my thanks to David Kerslake and Noel Crack for their ingenuity in bringing the John Clare Society and Edward Thomas Fellowship together in a well-planned programme with three excellent speakers.

As a member of both societies from their inception, I might say that my roads to Clare and Thomas had already converged, and I was consequently intrigued to discover, through the afternoon 'Audience engagement session', the degree of overlap in the interests of those attending in the lives and works of the two poets. I sat with Peter Cox, a Clare Society Vice President and a great ambassador for Clare, and in conversation learned of the short distance he had travelled on the Edward Thomas road. It was with great pleasure that I found he had been given a prompt card with my favourite poem, 'As the Team's Head-Brass'!

I came to Clare in the late 1950s on my 'Journey out of Essex' to Stevenage where the poet had slept rough on the night of July 20th 1841, as recorded in his journal:

> I scaled some old rotten paleings into the yard and then had higher railings to clamber over to get into the shed or hovel which I did with difficulty being rather weak and to my good luck I found some trusses of clover piled up about 6 or more feet square which I gladly mounted and slept on there was some trays in the hovel on which I could have reposed had I not found a better bed I slept soundly but had a very uneasy dream I thought my first wife lay on my left arm and somebody took her away from my side which made me wake up rather unhappy I thought as I awoke somebody said 'Mary' but nobody was near I lay down with my head towards the north to show myself the steering point in the morning

At this time I was helping to establish the Stevenage and District Ornithological Society. I had found James Fisher's article, 'The Birds of John Clare' as reprinted in *The First Fifty Years: a History of Kettering and District Naturalists Society and Field Club* (1954). Clare's sightings of birds and his detailed descriptions of their 'jizz' and plumage resulted in additions to the County List.

This led me to James Reeves' Selection of Poems for the Heinemann edition, which firmly rooted my interest in John Clare, and I was particularly interested in the links with Edmund Blunden's work. I cannot be specific as to when Edward Thomas became a literary pilgrim on my road, but I have a clear recollection of the day I found his poetry. My wife's parents had retired from Old Welwyn in 1963 and Pam and I were motoring to East Blatchington, near Seaford, taking a break in our journey at Reigate, where browsing in a bookshop I found the Faber edition of *The Collected Poems*, Eighth impression April 1961, with the illuminating Foreword by Walter de la Mare – a copy which I cherish.

It may have been only a brief but nevertheless a poignant part of the day's discussion to align Thomas's scooping up of a handful of English soil to explain his enlisting, and Clare's distress at the enclosure of his native open fields, to the moving campaign the previous day by young people of many nations alerting us to the impending disasters to our environment if we continue to ignore conservation issues.

I was fascinated with the pre-lunch session that centred on Edward Thomas's poem 'Old Man', or 'Lad's-love', which is a hoar-green feathery herb, a plant also known to Clare. *Artemisia* is a name given to a large family of plants but Thomas is writing of Southernwood (*abrotanum*) o.e. 'sutherne-wudu', a woody plant from the south which the poet describes as 'almost a tree'. I have it growing by my back door (a location which Clare would have known), so when passing I am greeted with its distinctive aroma. Roy Vickery in his *Dictionary of Plant Lore* (1995) records how the youths of the fens, before setting out on an early spring or summer stroll, would cut sprigs of the plant to put in their buttonholes, soon to be handed to the girl of their choice. Professor Mahood in her excellent *Clare Flora* has Helpston girls including it in their posies with its strong lingering smell.

Many old friends kindly ask me how Ronald Blythe is and on the Monday previous to the Study Day I had made one of my regular visits to Bottengoms Farm. I found Ronnie in a state of perfect contentment. He no longer writes and seldom reads, and wants for nothing. A group of loyal friends and dedicated carers keep watch over him and provide for his needs. He sits and looks out across the garden to the field with the horses on the hill, a scene of tranquillity. The old house itself is a haven of peace, and he is surrounded by beautiful pictures, memorabilia and the company of two cats. It is a contemplative life; he enjoys being, while also ready to leave us at any moment.

The annual visit to The Clare Festival was always his highlight of the year and needless to say I am sure he would wish to be remembered to you.

Alan Cudmore

HERB ROBERT: geranium robertianum

Late October.
Everything is tired, an old-age feel
of collapse and withering.
A universal,. sucked-out, green
prepares the lane for what's to come.
Except here, by the steps to a well.
Herb Robert still brightens the darkness.
All summer, it flowered unnoticed
but, now that more flamboyant flowers
have gone, it comes into its own,
a continuity of calm when nothing else is.

Mike Sharpe

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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February 2020

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