The John Clare Society

Newsletter no.144 February 2022

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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Chair: Dr Valerie Pedlar (vpedlar@yahoo.co.uk)

Vice Chair and Journal Editor: Professor Simon Kövesi, Dept. of English, Oxford Brookes University, Oxford OX3 0PB (01865 483587) skovesi@brookes.ac.uk

Hon. Secretary and Festival Co-ordinator: Ms Sue Holgate (01353 668638) smholgate@outlook.com

Hon. Treasurer: Mrs Linda J Curry

Membership Secretary: Dr Robert Heyes, 53 Judd Road, Tonbridge, Kent TN9 2NH (01732 358272) bob.heyes@yahoo.co.uk

Newsletter Editor: Dr Stephen Sullivan, 3 Primrose Hill, Little Gransden, Sandy, Beds. SG19 3DP (01767 677906) ssullonly@aol.com

Archivist: Dr Sam Ward (sam.ward@ntu.ac.uk)

Sales Officer: David Smith, 3 Astwick Road, Stotfold, Hitchin, SG5 4AP. djsapt@gmail.com

Publicity Officer: Mrs Ann Marshall, 3 Ash Tree Way, Bassingham, Limcoln LN5 9GY. (01522 788656) annmarshall2@btinternet.com

Committee Members: Noel Crack, Mrs Anna Kinnaird, Dr Erin Lafford, Mrs Mavis Leverington, Dr Mike Mecham OBE

John Clare Cottage Liaison: (Pending)

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CHAIR OF THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY.

Our excellent Chair, Dr Valerie Pedlar, is due to retire at the 2022 AGM and we are seeking nominees to replace her. The term is for one year, re-elected at each AGM, but we usually ask Chairs to take the position for a minimum of three years. The Society holds three Committee meetings per year, usually at Peterborough (though recently meetings have been held by Zoom), and an AGM during the Festival in July.

If you would be interested in finding out more, please get in touch with our Secretary, Sue Holgate at smholgate@outlook.com.

The John Clare Society Festival

The Importance of Tradition
Friday 15 – Sunday 17 July 2022

We are hoping to hold the Festival this year in Helpston, near Peterborough (the birthplace of John Clare) with the Midsummer Cushion Ceremony on Friday 15 July and the main Festival and AGM on Saturday 16 July. There will be a church service on Sunday 17 July. The theme for the Festival will be *The Importance of Tradition*. Each year the children from the John Clare Primary School take part in a poetry competition on our theme and it will be interesting to see what they make of Tradition!

We are very fortunate to have Professor John Goodridge as our keynote speaker. He has written extensively on tradition and we look forward to hearing him. There will be the usual stalls, refreshments in the Village Hall and Bluebell, and folk dancing, village walks, and poetry reading in the church. Our concert this year will be given by *Innocent Hare*, a small group of folk singers who promise us a varied range of John Clare's tunes and songs.

An extra event this year will be a Ghost Walk around Helpston which should be interesting!

So, fingers crossed, we hope to go ahead for 2022 – please 'pencil' the dates in your diary and we look forward to welcoming you. Further details will be available in the next Newsletter and on the website.

Sue Holgate – Festival Co-ordinator.

SALES REPORT

This covers '£ income' after any postage costs from the beginning of July to the end of December. In bald terms, the 2020 period was £473 versus current period of £312.

2020 figures have no Clare Cottage £, but 2021 has £220 from its re-opening. This leaves £92, which was made up of almost single numbers of JCS books, cds, dvd and assorted postcards. The second half of this year was much slower than last year although I did 'buy in' some books to supply to Australia (and very happy to do so) which after postage left minimal 'profit'. But all part of the service of JCS, I thought. I have also had some queries which I managed to answer, though lost those sales to Amazon.

Why were 2020 six months figures higher?

The Meeting was a new introduction to the list and meant a busy couple of months and approx. £100 additional profit. That period also saw a couple of quite large journal sales and a slew of dvd and *Poet for all Seasons*, in addition to many postcards and the more normal sale of books. This was because of the higher profile of Clare in 2020 which, sadly, did not repeat in sales for the same period 2021.

Once again, the lack of physical opportunities to meet people has been disappointing but John Clare's visibility does seem to have been raised and celebrated through 2021.

David Smith

MEMBERSHIP

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

John Bangay, Stamford
Fred Chance, Stroud
Carol Evelyn Fisher & partner, Helpston
Janet Coles, Templecombe
Peter Allan, Mapperley, Nottingham
John Abbott, Higham Ferrers
Maureen Thomas & G. H. Peckett, Uppingham
Sheila Lomas, Lytham

We regret to announce the passing of our long-standing member, David Greenwood, of Huddersfield.

Robert Heyes, February 2022

tis irksome to a boy to be alone….

> I believe I was not older then 10 when my father took me to seek the scanty reward of industry Winter was generally my season of imprisonment in the dusty barn [John's father had made him 'a light flail for threshing'] Spring and Summer my assistance was wanted elsewhere in tending sheep or horses in the fields or scaring birds from the grain or weeding it, which was a delightful employment
>
> ['Sketches in the Life of John Clare' in *By Himself* (ed.Robinson & Powell, Carcanet 1996) p.4]

'Delightful' will be considered further below, but it is interesting to read this entry alongside words of a South Devonshire vicar in 1882, recalling his first parish in 1850 and hearing men then in their 70s and 80s talking about their boyhoods. He spoke of:

> [A] considerable tyranny in compelling wives and boys (the latter in their ignorance liked the practice) to go out to field-work….the little urchins of seven or eight years were sent, morning after morning, wet or shine to frighten birds from the newly-sown fields at, it might be fourpence a day, but certainly not more. They got to like the freedom and the fresh air, but such occupation was quite subversive…fatal to any schooling for the boys…many keen intellects wasted for want of cultivation, many more than those who class all rustics as bumkins, chawbacons, louts, have any idea of….
>
> Rev. Hawker. Devonshire Association *Transactions*, 1882 p.332

They 'got to like the freedom and the fresh air' was perhaps part of what made the occupation 'delightful' for John Clare, who loved those elements, too. Those times afforded him much more than that, though. That 'freedom' gave him opportunities to look around him. He would study, watch and listen; snatch moments to read, and later on, to jot down lines that came to him. Schooling 'prompted my ambition to make the best use of my absence from school, as well as at it' [p.4 'Sketches' see below]. There is a strong impression, reading many of his poems, that his boyhood was idyllic: although living in poverty, his was a loving family home. He had freedom to wander and wonder, to join in village games, or to choose not to at times – feeling 'a curiosity to wander about the spots were I had never been before' [*By Himself* p.40]. One stanza from *The Village Minstrel* (xxvi) succinctly presents something of the reality, as it was for Lubin (Clare) :

> Full well might he his early days recal,
> When he a thresher with his sire had been;
> When he a ploughboy in the fields did maul,
> And drudg'd with toil through almost every scene;
> How pinch'd with winter's frowning he has been;
> And tell of all that modesty conceals,
> Of what his friends and he have felt and seen:
> But, useless naming what distress reveals,
> As every child of want feels all that Lubin feels.

'Maul', 'drudg'd', 'pinch'd' are graphic enough, but that final couplet speaks about child poverty in a way that is distressingly recognisable in our own day.

It is here that I would like to return to the title of this piece, also from *By Himself*, part of Clare's 'Sketches in the Life' [pp.8–9]. Clare is writing about solitude and how his work at one time took him 'by myself to weeding the grain, tending horses and such like'. Clare often sought places to be alone, but here he is specific; for a 'boy' to be alone is 'irksome'. Definitions which include 'tedious' and 'wearisome' are apposite

here. The line made me think again about boys' 'occupations'; particularly, that of bird-scarer. It was essential work; crops needed protecting from bird populations much greater than we know today. The boys were paid pence for a long day's toil. We read of 'The boy returning home at night from toil' [p.35 'March', *The Shepherd's Calendar*]; task unspecified, but the line is telling enough.

Clare tells how arduous labour could be for the ploughman, shepherd, hedger and others; yet workers also whistle merrily, sing, giving cheery calls as they go about their labour. Bird-scarer boys don't come across as whistling or cheery. They are 'hoarse'. Clare had been a bird-scarer. He would have known about being hoarse at the end of a day in the field. Even at daybreak! – the 'hoarse tongued bird boy whose unceasing calls // Join the Larks ditty to the rising sun' ['The Wheat Ripening', Oxford Authors 1984 (ed. Robinson & Powell) p.103] There may have been some respite for his voice, had he a 'pealing horn' to blow, or wooden clappers to snap together.

Work was never-ending, from early to late , often in fields far from home. The boy is recalled in Clare's 'Summer Images':

The sawning* boy by tanning corn espy
With clapping noise to startle birds away
And hear him bawl to every passer bye
To know the hour of day
'Summer Images' [Oxford Authors, p.127]

[* 'sawning' also dallying or sauntering, but here – with its drawn-out initial syllable – so suggestive of tiredness, boredom]

The boys were lonely, cold and miserable, out in all weathers, having to make constant noise, or to chase the birds off. The demanding, endless slow-moving time, was from sowing, through to first shoots showing, but boys could still be needed through to late autumn. It seems that it was the birds that were dominant! Always the crows, but the linnets were troublesome in their great numbers. Boys would attempt to make seats and shelter for themselves, not that there was much leisure time.

Till noisey boys to mornings labours go
& drive all from their lodgings but the crow
All but the crow that seldom flies away
& tarrys with his noises all the day
They seek their house together in the storms
And only from the stranger feel alarm

'Alarm' not from the bird-boy, Clare suggests; perhaps with a touch of experiential irony.

The turnips wanted scaring & the boy
Is called to follow in his old employ
Who takes his gun and clappers & away
& finds the birds before him half a day
He hollos till hes hoarse and scarce can creep
But birds are never tired nor go to sleep

The linnets, though, 'darting up and dropping down' meant that he could not even rest to have his dinner, having to eat it standing up as they

Are always settling round his old retreats
& and give no leisure so he stands and eats….

& on from day to day he went along
& found no time to play or sing a song [p.300]

If he used a gun [a boy, under 10? Whose gun?] it was to no effect:

But guns where naught they scarcely heard the noise
Or if they started they were scarcely gone
Ere half a hundred came instead of one
& found with vexing* haste as on he goes
A nest of linnets worse than all the crows
Though woods were nigh he dare not even look
Nor could he scare them when he clapt his book
When one brood from his bawling noises fled
Another almost settled on his head
He would make peace but they fed night and day
& Sunday came with nothing left for play
The Sundays leisure would not let him be
They came to labour on & so must he
So on he holloed till he scarce could speak
& hoarsely bawled his labour all the week [p.301]

[* vexing – interesting word; synonym of "irksome" ?]

Those extracts are from *Poems of the Middle Period v, Northborough Poems*. Could the bird-boy who 'clapt his book' have been John Clare making another hopeless attempt to scare off the birds? We feel he could be and can almost sense the despair and exhaustion.

'November', in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, gives yet another aspect of a bird-boy's experience that contrasts with 'delightful employment':

The boy that scareth from the spirey wheat
The mellancholy crow – quakes while he weaves
Of rustling flags and sedges tyd in sheaves
Or from nigh stubble shocks a shelter thieves
There he doth dithering* sit or entertain
His leisure hours down hedges lost to leaves
While spying nests where he spring eggs hath taen
He wishes in his heart twas summer time again
And oft he'll clamber up a sweeing tree
To see the scarlet hunter hurry bye
And feign woud in their merry uproar be
But sullen labour hath its tethering tye
Crows swop around and some on bushes nigh
Watch for a chance when ere he turns away
To settle down their hunger to supply
From morn to eve his toil demands his stay
Save now and then and hour which leisure steals for play

[* dithering – not our 'uncertainty'. The Oxford Authors edition glosses 'shivering']

'Leisure' is not allowed for in the day – it has to be stolen. It was taken, you feel, with one eye over his shoulder!

I believe that last stanza indicates that child labour was something Clare cared about. He wrote about it with great honesty, revealing a depth of empathy for those boys. As with all his labourers, the bird-boy is anonymous. But I believe that he is more than a stock figure. There might have been an element of biography in Clare's

depictions, and I believe his childhood experiences had stayed with him. We don't know what impact particularising bird-scarers might have had on his readers [cow- or horse-minders don't get such attention] but

Sullen labour hath its tethering tye

is an unforgettable line, leaving no doubt where Clare's heart and mind are at.

[I am grateful here to Roger Sales, a significant and idiosyncratic Clare scholar and champion, not as often credited nowadays as he deserves to be. He it was who led me to think about that line, and also to realise that Clare considered 'play' very important in the lives of children. [Roger Sales, *Pastoral & Politics 1780–1830* in the 'English Literature in History' series (Gen. Editor Raymond Williams. Hutchinson, 1983), Ch.5 'John Clare and the Politics of Pastoral']

As Clare began his 'Sketches in the Life of John Clare' , he was looking back to a time when the work out of doors might have seemed 'delightful occupation'. Reading the poems, however, suggests that he understood and wanted his readers to understand that the reality of bird-scaring was something very much other, and unquestionably 'irksome'.

Norman Goodman
September 2021

FOR JOHN

Emotion is a wonderful word
It contains an ocean
Sound and motion
Moving deeply
Where are the limits
Of such notions
Where is the shore

FOR MARY

Your smiling face
your loveliness
the flower
of the heart

A beautiful face
as expression
of the harmony
of the soul within

For John Clare and Mary Joyce and for other Johns and Marys

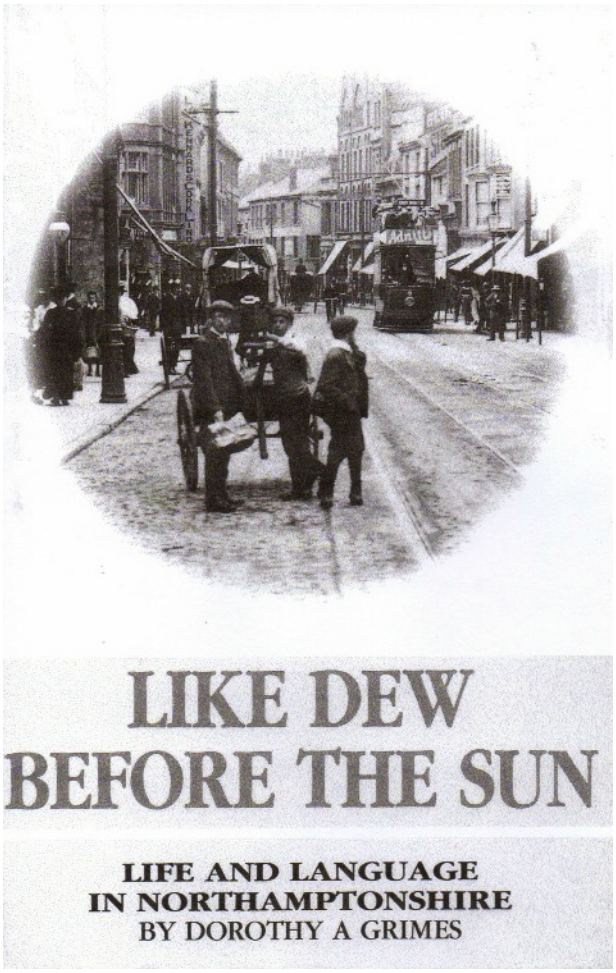
Bob Kelly

THE NORTHAMPTONSHIRE DIALECT

I have to admit that I was just a bit taken aback when I read Alex Broadhead's paper, 'John Clare and the Northamptonshire Dialect: Rethinking Language and Place' in the last issue of our *John Clare Journal*. In setting out his intention in writing the piece he explains:

> In this article, I want to suggest that the idea of the Northamptonshire dialect didn't exist when Clare wrote the verse that formed his first collections. On the contrary, the Northamptonshire dialect only came into being as a consequence of successive recontextualisations of Clare's writing, years after it was first published.

Give it whatever name you like, surely the important question is, were these provincial words and phrases used by Clare those spoken in his part of the country and the surrounding area? I agree that writers and scholars, over the past two hundred years, have tended to use John Clare's writings as evidence for authenticity, often without question. This includes Anne Elizabeth Baker in her two-volume *Northamptonshire Words and Phrases* of 1854. But a few have gone directly to the descendants of the people on the ground in Clare's day. One writer who has done this is Dorothy A Grimes. In her book, *Like Dew Before the Sun: Life and Language in Northamptonshire*, which she privately published in 1991, she covers all aspects of the local culture. The book, which is an extensive study, contains twenty pages on the life of John Clare and also a fifty-page 'Northamptonshire Glossary' of words and phrases which were collected throughout the County and its borders. Significantly she begins her Glossary in the following way: 'No word or phrase in the glossary is taken from a book. All, except them I know myself, have been given to me by people from Northampton, the county or its borders. Many of whom lost no time in giving me expressive examples of how the words were used…. In the glossary, place-names in parentheses show where a word was found. Words with no place-names are in more general use'.



The extensive glossary, which contains about 1,500 words and phrases, has a delightful feeling of age and authority to it and has relatively few references to John Clare. In fact, just eighteen quotations from Clare's writings are listed to demonstrate the use of a word, and some of these vary slightly from the word listed. Of the ninety words included in the glossary to Clare's *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, only ten are to be found here.

On studying other early glossaries, such as Carr's *Craven Dialect* (1828), it soon became clear that some words and phrases had almost universal use in England, but that others were peculiar to certain areas and, indeed, quite a number in Dorothy Grimes's list I could not find at all anywhere else. The area in which a

particular dialect is found can vary a great deal, from perhaps a small valley to several hundred square miles. For many years I lived in the village of Ingleton, in the north-west corner of the Yorkshire dales, where most of the people spoke in a fairly typical, broad Yorkshire way. However, just over the hill in Dentdale, speech was very different, with strange words and odd pronunciations of others. Indeed, a Scandinavian professor, Bertil Hedevind, wrote a whole book on the valley language, *The Dialect of Dentdale in the West Riding of Yorkshire* (1967), in which he compared the local speech with that of Norway.

The powerful influence of dialect in a community has been well shown in my own family. Until the age of seven, I lived in Suffolk, but when my father died in 1952, my mother moved back to Yorkshire, and I well remember my classmates at school commenting on my unusual East Anglian voice. The difference was quite striking. The well-known question in Suffolk, 'Ha ya gotta lite boy?' Became 'Aster gitten a lite mate?' But in a relatively short time I was speaking like a local, with a Yorkshire accent that I carry to this day. Likewise with my sister, who left Ingleton at the age of sixteen to share a flat in Leeds with a couple of friends. Within a few years she had taken on the familiar Leeds twang, with its particular choice of words and way of delivery.

Before the spread of the telephone, radio and television, you could say that everywhere in the British Isles had its own particular mode of vocal expression. Any merchant or salesman travelling around England in the 18th and 19th centuries would have been well aware of different speech that he met in the course of his business. This would have applied just as much to Northamptonshire as anywhere else. The local way of communicating would have existed whether John Clare had been there to witness it or not. Rather than the poet creating the idea of a dialect, I do think that we can look to John Clare to give us a very good indication of the means and mode of expression that he lived among.

Noel Crack

The Alliance of Literary Societies

The ALS weekend for 2022 will be 20 to 22 May in Hull, hosted by the Larkin Society. Keep an eye on the ALS website for details. Also, do visit the website to find our latest newsletter and journal:

hpps://allianceofliterarysocieties.Wordpress.com

Valerie Pedlar

THE POLITICAL DIMENSION

This is an abbreviation of Ch.1 of Doreen Thakoordin's M.A. Dissertation, 'How does an exploration of John Clare's writing about politics, religion and mental health enhance his reputation?' (Open University, January 2021)

Enclosure came to Helpston when Clare was sixteen, a vulnerable age. His happy childhood world comprising Helpston and an approximate eight-mile radius around it would be gone forever, together with his sense of belonging.

Nowhere in Clare's work is this sense of loss so eloquently set down as in this extract from his early poem, 'Helpstone':

> But now alas those scenes exist no more
> The pride of life with thee (like mine) is oer
> The pleasing spots to which fond memory clings
> Sweet cooling shades and soft refreshing springs
> And though fate's pleas'd to lay their beauties by
> In a dark corner of obscurity
> As fair and sweet the blo[o]m'd thy plains among
> As blooms those Edens by the poets sung
> Now all laid waste by desolations hand
> Whose cursed weapons levels half the land

This complaint at the loss of his home village is made more heart-breaking because of the lyrical passage in the middle. Here Clare uses assonance to represent the calming of the shades and the sound of the freshwater spring. The tone varies between sadness, sweet recollection and anger. In line six, however, a change occurs. The shorter line which, on first scanning is invisible, represents the obscurity into which his beloved home has descended. The metre, too, is changed from the iambic pentameter form in this line alone, stressing how deeply the poet feels the loss of what represented a happier time.

Clare's clever use of 'bloom'd' and 'blooms' in lines seven and eight serves to strengthen the link between Helpstone as the Eden of his childhood and other '…Edens by the poets sung', referring to the biblical Garden of Eden. Now, however, comes the sting in the tail. Gone are the feelings of bereavement, to be replaced by a vitriolic attack on those who caused this 'desolation'.

It is easy to understand why John Taylor, Clare's publisher, reluctantly cut out the last couplet of the extract in the fourth edition, particularly as Lord Radstock had helped to promote Clare's work among his influential friends. Clare was angered by this omission because his poetry and letters were his way of fighting inequality as he saw and experienced it. He was no Luddite or rebel in the physical sense, but expressed his hatred and resentment of the prevailing social system through his writing.

There is nothing in Clare's vast raft of writing that expresses this deep resentment more than *The Parish.* An important work, certainly, but one that is difficult to date as parts of it appear in no fewer than eighteen manuscripts and Clare did not stop working on it until 1827, almost eight years after he had started it. As Robinson reminds us in his Introduction:

> *The Parish* actually emerges from a whole mass of writing about religion both in prose and poetry, most of which has never been published. (p.21)

Throughout the poem, the realities of farmyard life – copulation, birth, mud and excrement – are referred to, and we can appreciate Clare as a realistic, if

blunt, observer of nature and how like animals' behaviour he regards the practice of some human beings.

The Parish, although completed in 1827, was not published until after Clare's death in 1864. He is explicit about the origins of the poem. It was, he tells us '…begun and finished under the pressure of heavy distress with embittered feelings under a state of anxiety and depression almost amounting to slavery.' This is unsurprising when we recall the series of disappointments which Clare had recently experienced in his life.

In common with other examples of great literature*, The Parish* works on a variety of levels.

Charlesworth [1] deemed these lines describing the workhouses as '…invaluable for legal social history in illuminating the reality of the operation of the Poor Law':

> The light of day is not allowed to win
> A smiling passage to the glooms within
> No window opens on the southern sky
> A luxury seemed to prides disdainful eye
> The scant dull light that forcefull need supplyd
> Scorn frowned and placed them on the sunless side
> Here dwell the wretched lost to hopeless strife
> Reduced by want to skelletons in life
> Despised by all een age grown bald and grey
> Meets scoffs from wanton children in their play
> Who laugh at misery by misfortune bred
> And points scorns finger at the mouldering shed
> The tottering tenant urges no replye
> Turns his white head and chokes the passing sigh
> And seeks his shed and hides his heart's despair
> For pity lives not as a listener there
> When no one hears or heeds he wakes to weep
> On his straw bed as hunger breaks his sleep (lines 1802–19)

Graphic, certainly, and presented to the reader in a journalistic style which does nothing to mask the despairing circumstances of the men, women and children who were forced to suffer the workhouse's privations.

Elaine Feinstein calls *The Parish* '*…*one of the fiercest political poems in the language.' She comments:

> *The Parish* carries the conviction of one who has seen the poor oppressed, who has heard the poor rate being announced in church after the parson's sermon and watched the Parish Clerk '…carrying the parish book from door to door / Claiming fresh taxes from the poor'.
>
> [*Selected Poems*, London University Tutorial Press 1968, p.22]

I think that, in part, Clare's state of mind, already causing concern at such an early staghe in his career, must be attributed to his dilemma between the passionate feelings of injustice causing him to be 'embittered' and the knowledge that he was in thrall to the parish rich who held the purse-strings.

Clare begins *The Parish* with a reference to his own Golden Age – a time before enclosure caused so much bitterness and division between farmers and their employees and the latter were treated with respect '…that made us as equals not as slaves the poor' (106). Whether, in fact, the labourers were truly equal to the more prosperous farmers is a nice point. In any case Clare grieves for the loss of those honest, generous and cheerful homes to be replaced by what he describes as:

> …the slim things that rise where they stood

Are built by those who clownish taste aspires
To hate their farms and ape the country squires (118–20)

Thereafter in *The Parish* follow scathing portraits of men and women who often reflect each other in their stupidity. For example, Young farmer Bigg (239–68) is the counterpart of the Miss Peevish Scornful of preceding lines who is '…of this same flimsy class'. Young Bigg is '…the choice with madams of the farm'. Clare concedes, however, that these women do suffer longer than Bigg, at whose hands '…maids are ruined oft and mothers made' – witty homophones being used here.

Next in line for Clare's cutting satire is the aptly-named Headlong Racket, a drunkard and philanderer '…to the last akin' (281) (by character or blood we are not told), whose main pastimes are horses, dogs and women and who spends his time '…by turns to hunt and wh—e and shoot / Less than a man and little more than brute (144).

This uncompromising accusation sets the tone for equally unflattering descriptions of most of the characters to come.

One of the most vicious attacks in the poem is the one describing Farmer Cheetum, who is rumoured to have been based on farmer Gee of Helpston who was the landlord of Clare's childhood home and lived next door. It was only after Gee died that the two cottages which he had occupied with the Clares were altered to make four dwellings so that the Clare family's accommodation was cut by half, we know not on whose instruction.

In any case, Clare's Farmer Cheetum (who could, of course, been simply a figment of Clare's fertile imagination) squanders his wealth on dogs, women and horses, ignoring his farm and leaving it in the care of a hired servant until '…grain's sunk price' (399) bankrupts him. Careless of anything except himself, Farmer Cheetum still:

Hunts, shoots and rackets as he did before
And still finds wealth for horses, dogs and whore
And dogs and wh–– and horses in his train
Are all that have no reason to complain (407–10)

The artistic irony in the last line of the extract above provides an effective contrast to vocabulary used elsewhere in Cheetum's description. For example:

A dirty hog that on the puddles brink
Stirs up the mud and quarrels with the stink (319–20)

The harsh tenor of the 'k' and 'q' sounds in this metaphor express Clare's contempt and distaste for the behaviour of the rich.

The next vignette is Old Saveall, who is despised by Clare as a churchman who '…buys with wine the favours of the sect' (434) and his miserliness, as his name suggests, is evident in the information that he in '…dry times locks up his very wells' (444). Subsequent lines are followed by the biting comment: 'To lock up water must undoubted stand / Among the customs of a Christian land.'

Next in line for ridicule is 'Old Ralph', a possible pseudonym for the bookseller and independent preacher, R.B. Henson, who Clare describes as '…the veriest rake' (579) who fancied himself cleansed of sin after consulting his '…ranting priest' (583). Clare may be suggesting a Catholic clergyman here with the use of 'priest', or the emphasis may be on 'ranting' referring to the Ranters Movement within the Church of England into whose activities Clare had briefly joined whilst seeking his own religious truth. In either case Clare's tone here is unfavourable. A fraud of the highest order, Old Ralph cheats his congregation so successfully that '…midst his flock [he] seemed little less that saint' (608).

Next to be the victim of Clare's wrath is 'A Mighty Doctor' a title as rich in irony as his name is hilarious – Dr Urine. By 'reading in their water all their ails' (654) he relieves the unsuspecting 'clowns' not of their maladies but their money.

In the most overt reference to the consequences of enclosure, Clare rails against 'the modern farmer' (716) for colluding with unscrupulous politicians to reject the old ways, when farm owner and farmworker had mutual respect and both benefitted.

The ironically-named 'wise' farmers rejected the harmony of a bygone age.

> Not with their blind forefathers simple views
> Who read of wars and wished that wars would cease
> And blessd the king and wished his country peace (724–6)

There is no doubt that, for all his vitriol against those who appear to be what they are not, Clare was a patriot, respected the genuine Royal family (made clear in the extract above) and those who were part of the ancient aristocracy. Furthermore, Clare dedicated *The Parish*, of all his works, to 'My Lord Radstock' although it ought to be remembered that this was perhaps due as much to sponsorship and custom as it was to reverence.

So we encounter a tirade of invective against all politicians in the system. Clare, unfranchised himself, pours scorn on those like Young Bragg who 'Opinions gratis gives in men's affairs / Fool in his own but wondrous wise in theirs' (746). Furthermore, such persons like Young Bragg trumpet their own literary skills which, according to Clare are mainly non-existent: in short, certain politicians and other writers assume the persona of Young Bragg who, according to Clare's acid reference, is '…a jack of all trades, save his own' (739).

A further criticism of the Young Bragg character is his preponderance to wastefulness – a habit Clare despised, having for most of his life insufficient money to feed himself and his family. In this case Young Bragg had wasted his education, despite the efforts of his parents and teachers, and had become (and this is certainly no coincidence) a farmer. Young Bragg used what little he had learned to write 'ill-spelt trash' (763) in the Parish Newsletter.

It may well be that 'ill-spelt trash' is a veiled reference to John Taylor's butchering, rather than editing out, some of Clare's Northamptonshire dialect words.

A crisp, succinct proverbial retort is to be found a little later:

> Nor prouder bantum to a dung hill comes
> Then he to crow and peck and peck and crow
> And hurl bad english at retorting foe (804–6)

Here is the comedic image indeed, of a puffed-up little creature who lacks more expressive vocabulary than 'peck' and 'crow' and so is self-limiting when criticising others for their expressive and imaginative language.

A most despised character in *The Parish* is the Parish Clerk who, whilst willing '…to do whatever jobs they chuse' (1241) carries out the most despicable task of all 'Claiming fresh taxes from the needy poor' (1283).

There follows a bitterly scathing attack on how the poor are treated by the judicial and political systems of the parish.

Clare's impassioned complaint against the rural ruling class screams from the page:

> …Why should the poor sinning starving clown
> Meet jail and hanging for a stolen crown
> While wealthy thieves with knowledge bribes endued

Plunder their millions and are not pursued (1323–6)

Giving way to bitter sarcasm, Clare suggests that '…it must be malice in the poor or whim / Who seek relief and lay on them the blame' (1344).

Anger and contempt become wry irony and clever pun as Clare deals with Farmer Finch, 'Smooth tongue and fine an angel every inch / In outward guise and never known as yet / To run in Taverns, Brothels or in debt' (1373).

He wrongs the poor whom he has wronged for years
Making the house of prayer the house of sin
And placing Satan as high priest within (1393–5)

The situation in this extract is all entirely wrong, as the repetition of the word in the first line reflects. Drawing the reader's attention to the 'house', i.e. the Church, Clare emphasises how religion is turned on its head in binary opposition to its true purpose by substituting 'sin' for 'prayer', and 'Satan' for Christ.

Clare deals more leniently, although somewhat mockingly, with Justice Terror. Even though, in a characteristically direct tone that he is 'A blunt, opinionated, odd, rude man' (1402) Clare concedes that:

The poor can name worse governors than him
His gifts at Christmas time are freely given
No doubt as toll fees on the way to heaven (1411)

He seeks, through Clare's metaphor of '…toll fees on the way to Heaven', to buy his way to Heaven by seeming to be generous to the poor. Possibly Clare, who was an assiduous reader of the Bible, had Matthew's metaphor in mind 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God'

Yet another example of unfairness which Clare records with anger is the practice of imprisoning children in the pillory on the Sabbath.

To counterbalance his hatred, resentment and bitterness for most of the characters in the poem, we are now given a beautiful tribute to Clare's Golden Age through the Old Vicar.

There follows for this reader the sensation of being very close, physically and emotionally, to Clare as he describes in greater detail than before what life was like in that Golden Age which has gone forever. Drawing closer and raising his arm, Clare says: 'Yon cot when in its glory and its pride / Maintained the priest and half the poor beside.' (1688 9) Such power, such meaning in those neatly-rhyming lines! One can hear his soft, Northamptonshire burr. This vicar was a man who lived his Christianity proudly sharing the gifts of life with those who had nothing. No wonder he was loved by the peasant ploughmen and their families! Emphasising the disappearance of this way of living, Clare tells us that the Old Vicar lived so long ago, a lifetime ago, that only those people ' 'Greyheaded now left children when he died' would remember him. The fact that they were 'left' by him accentuates their mutual closeness: he truly was these children's father in a spiritual sense. The old man's plain headstone is described in language which may be quite uncharacteristic of Clare; bordering on the maudlin perhaps. Those who still attend this beloved man's grave are

……praying as they weep
To be full soon companions of his sleep
To share with him the churchyard's lonely peace
Where pride forgets its scorn and troubles cease
Where poverty's sad reign of care is oer
Nor tells its wants to be denied no more (1780–5)

This tender sestet is written in the style which Clare knew would appeal to the poor who came to pay their respects and demonstrates the versatility of the poet's genius.

As we near the end of our journey through Clare's gallery of unsavoury characters we encounter Farmer Thrifty, a character so much like many of the others – pretending to be something they are not. In Thrifty's case, he rose from poverty to sweet-talk his way to prosperity whereupon, too lazy to take care of his own possessions, he hired a steward who, in turn, lined his own pockets from increased taxes on the poor.

According to Clare, Job Thrifty was a '…rich, plain and superstitious man' (1857) who was in the habit of nailing horseshoes above his door to ward off witches. Perhaps surprisingly, there is no mention of this weakness in the pen portrait in *The Parish*, as believing in evil spirits would seem to be an ideal excuse for lampooning.

Bumtagg the obsequious bailiff, whose duties include throwing those who cannot pay their rent out of their impoverished homes, frequently into the workhouse, is dismissed by Clare as a lower creature than a dog, only marginally better than the obsequious, grovelling creature who is his assistant.

Such is Bumtagg, whose history I resign
As other knaves make room to stink and shine
And as the meanest knave a dog can brag
Such is the lurcher that assists Bumtagg (2094–7)

The last caricature is of a certain Mr. Puff:

If chance ere throws a poet in his way
He worms him in their notice until they
Half think they've seen the smirking fiend before
With so much confidence he tongues them oer (2171–4)

We may assume that Clare is referring to one of his publishers, possibly Henson, who offered to publish Clare's work whereupon Clare paid for flyers advertising the forthcoming publication only to find that Henson was already bankrupt.

We can see from Clare's interaction with the politics of the publishing world, the politics of the countryside and, indeed with national politics, that his was a deep intellect in matters of the distribution of power in the early nineteenth century.

Doreen Thakoordin

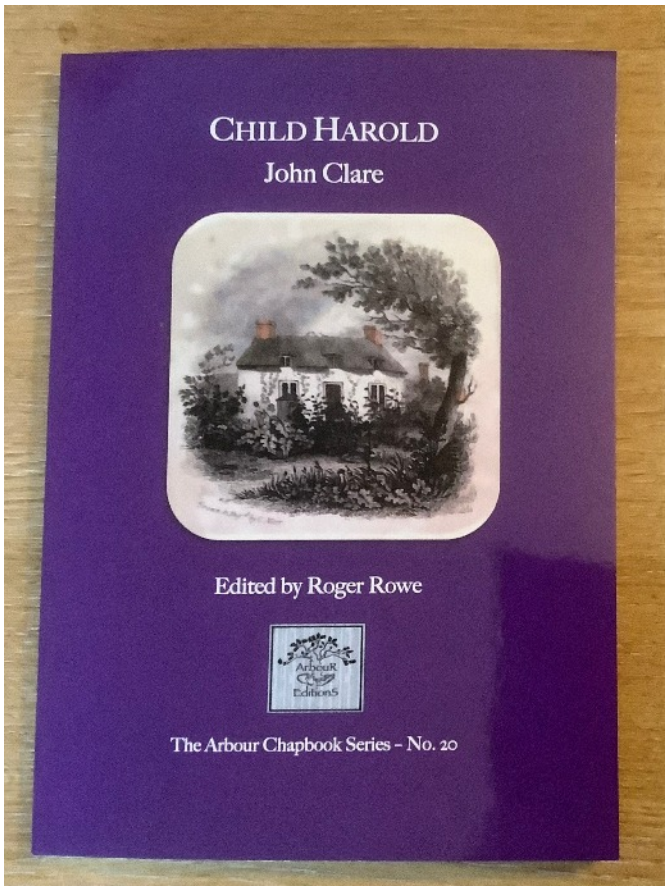
Further note:

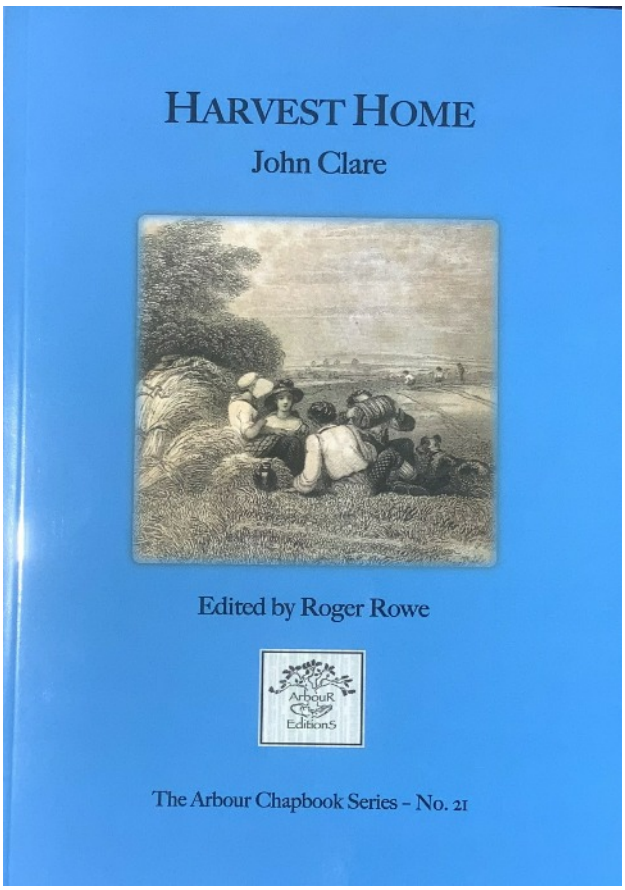
[1] Charlesworth, L. 'The Poet and the Poor Law: Reflections upon John Clare's *The Parish*', *Liverpool Law Review* 23, 2001 https://doi.otg/10.1023/A:1016085918179

Arbour Editions Chapbooks

Little did I realise when I set out to, as a tribute to the genre, produce inexpensive 32-page 'Chapbooks', that after four years there would now be 21 titles, several of which are of double length.

From Clare's Drinking songs/poems to his interest in Gothic writing; from his sadness at the enclosure of his beloved heathland to his outspoken views on Wealth and Honesty, the series has sought to bring to readers' attention themes that might surprise and excite, but also encourage further reading.





Child Harold

In the Spring of 2021, after twelve years of study and thought on my part, Chapbook no.20 brought *Child Harold* to the attention of my readers, based upon the research of Iraqi scholar Salman Al Wasiti many years ago. This was originally featured in JCS *Journal* for July 2001, but I felt required further expansion.

Initially inspired by Lord Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* – recording the disillusion of a world-weary young man – Clare's intricate narrative stanzas are interspersed with many more lyrics than had been in Byron's poem. In the words of Professor Eric Robinson, the poem is 'more sustained in thought than anything else he ever attempted'.

Clare wrote more than 3,000 lines of poetry and biblical paraphrases in 1841, from the salacious in *Don Juan* to the evocation of loss and home in *Child Harold.* Haunted by a shadow, searching for someone who could never appear, and with the void in his heart growing every day, the isolation within his soul felt like the abyss itself, eating away at his very existence.

So the text of the poem is saturated with thoughts of Mary, as Professor Robinson remarks: 'some of his very finest invocations of love for Mary Joyce are to be found in

Child Harold. These thoughts run like a scarlet thread through the whole text'. Clare mentions Mary over sixty times in the poem, while his 'second wife', Patty Turner, is mentioned just five times, and that, all in one early 1841 poem.

Throughout, Clare's visions of Mary are often set under over-clouded skies, in shaded bowers or in the twilight. She is slipping in his mind from the real presence of 'Rose of the World' to a spectre, an idealised vision of 'woman', perhaps summed up by these lines, from the final poem of the Child Harold sequence:

But now loves hopes are all bereft
A lonely man I roam
& abscent Mary long hath left
My heart without a home

Child Harold – Arbour Chapbook no. 20, is of double length and is available from me at £7.00 + £1.00 towards postage and packing (UK).

Harvest Home

In Autumn 2021, Chapbook no.21, *Harvest Home, h*as been published, with a selection of Clare's writings on the most important time in the lives of most agricultural workers.

The harvest was an opportunity for major end-of-season celebrations, a time for the village to come together and make merry. When the harvest work was done the Harvest Supper was celebrated, church harvest festivals not being invented until the Victorian period. Beer, smoking, and more or less harmless pranks usher out the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness.

Unsurprisingly too, the harvest was seen as a time of romance, an opportunity for intimacy between men and women who had closely worked together in the fields.

Before the ripened field the reapers stand
In fair array; each by the lass he loves
Thomson's *Seasons* – 'Autumn'

The bashful maid – sweet healths engaging flower
Lingering behind – oer rake still blushing bends
& when to take the horn fond swains implore
With feign'd excuses its dislike pretends
'The Harvest Morning' (lines 60–3)

It must be remembered however, that throughout this period, fluctuating grain prices and times of poor harvest, resulted in many families struggling to pay for their basic item of food, bread. Perhaps one in ten families remained below the 'breadline' over the period, increasing to nearly two out of every five families in times of food shortage.

O poverty! how basely you demean
The imprisond worth your rigid fates confine
'The Harvest Morning' (lines 51–2)

Harvest Home - Arbour Chapbook no. 21 – is available from me at £3.50 + £1.00 towards postage and packing (UK).

Roger Rowe

DIAMOND BOMBS AND BICYCLE TYRES:
Charles Causley and John Clare

A Two-Part Article by Mike Cooper (Trustee Director, The Charles Causley Trust)

> …I thought of the dead poet:
> …the poetry bursting like a diamond bomb.
>
> …O Clare: your poetry clear, translucent
> As your lovely name,
> I salute you with tears.
> And, coming out on the green from The Parting Pot,
> I notice a bicycle tyre
> Hanging from the high stone feathers of your monument.
> (from 'At the Grave of John Clare')

The poet, broadcaster and teacher Charles Causley (1917–2003) came from a working-class family, far from London. Largely self-educated after his early teens, he was compelled into grinding, low-paid work. Simultaneously, early literary promise produced some publications, making him a minor local celebrity by 1939. Deeply rooted in the life and traditions of his area, he still yearned powerfully for an 'escape'.

Sound familiar? Beyond these similarities, though, Causley/Clare parallels are harder to draw. Causley's life in Launceston between the wars was town-based, rather than fully rural, observing the natural world, not working in it. His schooling was broader, and in many ways better. If a bedrock of agrarian life, impacted by the Industrial Revolution and the enclosures, underpins Clare's writing, Causley's springboards were involvement with war, the arts generally, and travel. While both were powerfully influenced by folk-poetry traditions and the Romantics, Causley's writing was much affected by the 1930s' literary context of the Great War, modernism and political writing.

The casual stereotyping of each poet by the literary establishments of their time – in part through limited awareness of their full output – is different, too. Clare has now escaped such confines and is taken seriously in academia. Causley, despite his fellow-writers' high regard and enduring public popularity – think 'Timothy Winters', or 'Eden Rock' – is often narrowly pigeonholed. Labels like 'ballad poet', 'Cornish poet', 'children's poet', 'war poet', 'Christian poet' or 'comic poet' are all somewhat justified; but none of those are adequate in themselves. The variety and the complexity of genre, subject-matter, style and tone across his fifty years of writing is astonishing. There's been little significant study and understanding of his achievement, so far, compared with many other twentieth-century poets writing in English – or indeed, Clare.

Wide reading was one foundation of his work, and Clare's poetry must have figured early on for Causley. Through library loans, or spending what remained of his wages after helping his widowed mother with the household expenses, it seems likely that Blunden's pioneering 1920 edition of Clare was familiar to the young office clerk. Certainly, by whatever route, many of those poems were already absorbed and much-admired by Causley before demobilisation from the Navy in 1946.

Soon afterwards, serendipity, in the form of a group outing from a Peterborough teacher-training college, brought him to Helpston churchyard for the first time. The resulting poem, 'At the Grave of John Clare', appeared in Causley's first collection,

Farewell, Aggie Weston (No. 1 in the series *Poems in Pamphlet* from The Hand & Flower Press, 1951).

Unlike his later poems, no early fragments or versions survive. However, the final proofs in Exeter University's Causley Archive embody his habitually-long compositional process, always painstakingly refining poems towards publication. This one is likely the same: what we see is the result of sustained effort, and careful crafting.

The entire poem is 38 lines, across four irregular sections – in free-verse, note, rather than the style many expect of Causley. Heartfelt, knowledgeable appreciation of Clare's life and legacy is juxtaposed with an almost Larkinesque depiction of Helpston's post-war austerity at the time. Drab, neglected surroundings lead to a 'scythed' churchyard, culminating in the hushed discovery of a then-uncelebrated tombstone ('There he is: there is John Clare') and its terse epitaph. It is 'a stone of grey cheese', without flowers. Such images of the grey, isolated village and a locked, empty church with kneelers 'unstuffed' and a clock that 'fires off' the hour, all establish a decidedly downbeat tone.

Drawing of Charles Causley ca. 1970 by Stanley Simmonds RA: courtesy of the late Kent Stanton.

Nevertheless, Causley celebrates the contrast of unremarkable settings and poignant details of Clare's life-story with his astonishing artistic creativity. Reflections on the hardships and awkwardness of the peasant-poet's life – his naïvete, literary *faux pas*, a tortured handwriting, his way of walking, society's brief lionisation, his childhood terrors and a lonely end 'trundling' homewards in a cart for burial – arrive at a moving, memorable tribute from one poet to another. Causley's '…the poetry bursting like a diamond bomb' crystallises what now matters most.

That 'diamond' metaphor is straightaway reinforced twice ('O Clare! Your poetry clear, translucent/As your lovely name'), towards a quietly emotional accolade: 'I salute you with tears' – symbols which are themselves appropriately limpid and shining.

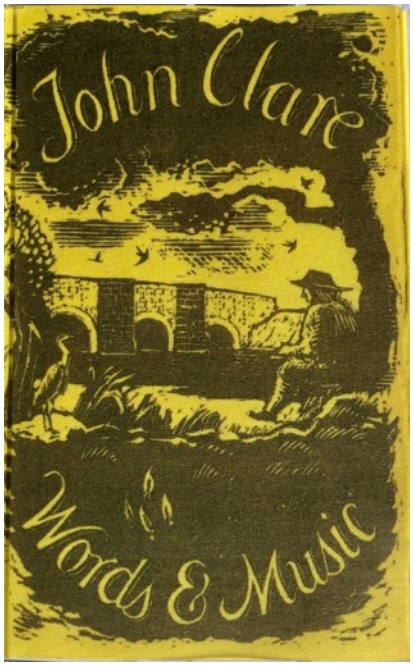
Sentimentality is quickly countered by Causley, though: a subsequent pint in the nearby pub (now, long-vanished) is capped by a disheartening sight of careless, callous neglect. The dangling, loutish disdain of a bicycle tyre on the memorial feels like another downbeat echo of Larkin – although his most characteristically pessimistic poetry was yet to appear.

A paean from an aspiring writer to an icon – yet, always a level-headed one – this poem reflects on Clare's life and gifts, and the connections and contradictions between those. Perhaps the young Causley was even pondering his own personal and literary future, in uneasy comparison. He wasn't to know it in the late 1940s, but he needn't have worried much.

Causley's links to Clare will be explored further in the next Newsletter.

John Clare Words and Music

a Cassette published for the John Clare Bicentenary of 1993



Receiving the links from Simon Kovesi for the final elements of 'The Meeting Project' reminded of this cassette by the JCS in 1993.

I am sure some of you will have heard or have a copy of this cassette. I suspect that our newer and younger members will have missed out as that was nearly thirty years ago! Because the original tape was so old I had it transferred onto a new cassette, which worked, except it still has the hiss and slight cracks of its age. No doubt technology could brighten it, but why? It's a classic.

Here is a rundown of the contributors:
Readings by Peter Horridge and Ann Surtees, Songs sung by Vikki Clayton (now living in New Zealand and still singing), music played by Pete Shaw, Editor Peter Cox. All produced for The John Clare Society by Steve Somers.

And for a quick run-down of contents I give a simple list:

Side One: 'Shooters Hornpipe', a fiddle tune; two extracts from his autobiographical writings; lines from *Child Harold*; 'The Sky Lark'; 'The Thrushes Nest' and 'The Wren'; stanzas from *The Shepherd's Calendar*; the song 'Winter it is past'; followed by the poems: 'Silent Love', 'The Mores', 'Written in November', and 'Winter in the Fens'.

Side Two: 'The Nightingales Nest'; letter to Taylor & Hessey; letter to Mrs Emmerson; letter to Hessey; autobiographical writings; 'The Gipsy Camp'; Fiddle tune ('Bang up'); stanzas from 'The Flitting'; 'Decay A Ballad'; two lyrics from *Child Harold*; 'I Hid my Love'; 'A Vision'; 'An Invite to Eternity'; 'I Am'; 'The Peasant Poet'; fiddle tune: 'India Queen'.

I am sad not to have the space to talk on items individually but the overall impression, even after thirty years, is that John Clare's words and work on this collection are impressive and rewarding for any level of listener. All elements of the voices in readings, poems and song show an understanding of Clare himself in addition to knowing his work. To have this, albeit a small taste of his songs, poems, writings and music-collecting, is a pleasure at any time,

In 1991 Vikki Clayton released the album *Midsummer Cushion*, which was later re-released as a cd of nine tracks, all closely based on Clare's poems. 'The Badger' (not on the 1991 cassette) being the last and for me, most effective of all. This cd in no way takes away the importance of The John Clare Society's superb contribution to the world of Clare in their 1993 Bicentenary collection but is a serious contribution.

Some, of course, may wish to listen to the track 'John Clare' by the Syndromes, recorded some time between '80–'83 and released in November 2016! (here I am somewhat tongue in cheek, maybe!)

David Smith

BEECH TREES
Fugus sylvatica

A line of Beech trees planted twenty years ago
is now a colonnade, not leading anywhere,
in no man's land between two farms
but with such presence that the lane assumes
a dignity that takes you by surprise.

To edge a pasture, Blackthorn would have done as well
but this is more than practicality
A robust pride is in their self-assured
fulfilment of a noble whim

CAMPION
Silene dioica

Late Campion is stretched and slender,
almost lost in tangled leaves.
washed out by storms, weak petals
turn in vain for sunlight
to a watery sky.

Earlier flowers have seeded now
in multiuples cast randomly
to fall to ground, waiting their turn
for Spring.

But this October Campion will never seed.
Flowering too late to recreate itself,
it flourishes only in these words.
See now, its petals
tremble in the wind.

Mike Sharpe

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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The John Clare Society, founded in 1981, publishes books, CDs, DVDs, pamphlets and postcards, an annual Journal and a members' newsletter every four months.

Please support our activities via this catalogue which also includes a small selection of other books on Clare.

If you wish you can email an order or question to me. We are now able to accept PayPal and debit/credit cards for mobile payment. Orders by post and cheque still welcome.
Full address and ordering information below.

David

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BOOKS 2022

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