



The John Clare & Society

Newsletter no. 148

June 2023



THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

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Cover artwork: Carry Akroyd

Annual General Meeting

Notice is hereby given that the Annual General Meeting of the John Clare Society will take place on Saturday 15 July 2023 at 10.15am in St. Botolph's Church, Helpston. All members and those attending the Festival are cordially invited.

In the last Newsletter, we printed the vixit for Ronald Blythe wrongly: it should have read '1922–2023'. The error was corrected in the e-mailed edition. Norman Lee passed away on 12 December 2022 and not 10 December as reported. Pressures of space meant that one page of the Northampton Lunatic Asylum document was omitted from John Goodridge's article, and is included in this Newsletter, courtesy of the John Clare Society Archive, Northamptonshire Record Office. (All three pages are repeated in the e-mail version.)



THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY FESTIVAL 2023

The Planning Committee would like to invite as many of our members as possible to join us in Helpston for the annual Festival celebrating the life and work of John Clare. This year marks the 230th anniversary of his birth on July 13th 1793.

There will be all of the usual attractions, and not only is everyone welcome – members, family and friends alike – but all of the events, except the Saturday evening concert, are free to attend.

On Friday 14th July at 1pm the children of The John Clare Primary School will once again come to St. Botolph's Church in Helpston, bringing their Midsummer Cushions in class groups. Prizes for the annual Poetry Competition are then awarded for the top three in each age group. Parents, carers, family, friends and visitors are all welcome. This event ends at about 2.20pm.

The afternoon is free to enjoy local attractions. At 7pm there will be a Choral Evensong in St. Botolph's, featuring the choir of All Saints' Church, Northampton. To round off the day there is a folk evening in The Bluebell, Woodgate, with entry any time between 7.30 and 10.30pm.

Saturday 15th will, we hope, dawn bright and clear for the main day of festivities. There will be a Welcome Tent on the Green near the Monument, where you can buy Programmes for £2 to guide you through the day. These will also be on sale locally, prior to the Festival, or posted for £3 (contact details below). Or why not become a Friend of the Festival? For £15 you receive a Programme, a wonderful new book, *Journeys to Helpston*, by Alan Cudmore, in celebration of our former President and renowned writer Ronnie Blythe, and priority booking and seating for the concert. See Newsletter insert for full details.

There will be so much to see and do, so please come along to enjoy the picnic area, lunches and teas in the Village Hall, book sellers, open gardens, Morris dancing, exhibitions, walks, talks and much more. Everyone is welcome.

To end the day there will be a concert in church by The Big Fiddle Band from 7pm until 8.15pm, for which tickets are £7. Payments by cheque or bank transfer to the Society.

The weekend finishes with a Communion service in St. Botolph's Church on Sunday 16th at 10.45am, which is led by Revd. Gary Alderson.

For Programmes (available from June), tickets or further information please contact:

Ann Marshall, Festival Organiser

01522 788656 or e-mail annmarshall2@btinternet.com

GENERAL SALES, July 2022 to April 2023

The John Clare Society year between festivals is now in its tenth month, at time of writing, and much has happened. From my 'sales' point of view, the frequency of sales was increased by having the re-issue in CD format of the *Service Placing a Memorial plaque to John Clare in Poets' Corner*, which was originally in cassette form.

This was followed by Alan Cudmore's book, *Journeys to Helpston: Ronald Blythe and the John Clare Society*, becoming available (after which, Ronald Blythe sadly died, aged 100). Between these two items and a small number of other regulars, I was kept busy with visits to the Post Office – not forgetting a delivery trip to Helpston, an occasion I always enjoy.

Over the 10 months, the income on general sales totals £907.00 after postage. Of course this figure would be lower if I had to account for 'production' costs here. Note of biggest sales: Cudmore book 33, Memorial CD 14, *Earth & Sky* CD 4, *The Wood is Sweet* 18, *This Happy Spirit* 15, leather bookmarks 10, tea-towels 6, and single copies of other items.

New for June is a re-issue, in CD format, of the JCS: *John Clare: Words & Music*, also originally in cassette format. A small number of new cards and postcards should also be available at the Festival Bookstall in July.

I hope you manage to visit again this year and we get to say hello.

David Smith, Sales Officer.



FROM THE MEMBERSHIP SECRETARY

If you do not pay by Standing Order, you will receive a form inviting you to renew your membership with the emailed edition of this Newsletter. It would be appreciated if this form could be returned with your payment. The annual subscription is £15 for individuals, and for joint members £20.

You are welcome to pay by internet banking; details of the Society's bank account are on the renewal slip. If so, please complete and return the renewal form, or tell me by email that you have paid.

If you wish to pay by standing order, which simplifies things for everybody, then let me know and I will send you the appropriate form.

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

Anthony Ovens, Exmouth
Beverley Ford, East Wittering, West Sussex
Cris Yelland and Liz Bielok, Stockton-on-Tees
Melissa Dennison, Thackley, West Yorkshire
Michael Bowen, Epsom
Katy Macleod, Crediton
Mr & Mrs Peter Aldwinckle, Calverton, Notts
Peter Larke, Peterborough
James and Jill Armstrong, Dorchester
Nicky Mitchell, Mawdesley, Lancs
W. John Coletta, Wisconsin

Robert Heyes
Membership Secretary



Stephen Sullivan

JOHN CLARE: WORDS AND MUSIC CD

The John Clare Society first produced this as a cassette in 1993. Thirty years later it has been recorded from the original cassette and produced as a CD.

It will be available on Saturday 15th July, at the Helpston Festival, from the Society's bookstall. (Short-run, but repeatable) Price £6.00.

David Smith



THE JOHN CLARE COTTAGE

Friends of John Clare, Poet

Spring Gathering - A Celebration of John Clare in Readings, Talks & Song

A wonderful time was had by all at the John Clare Cottage on Friday 28 April when friends, scholars and enthusiasts attended 'Spring Gathering', an event of Readings, Talks & Song.

Thanks goes to the speakers who delighted with their excellent talks – John Goodridge, Robert Hamberger, Ellis Hall & Bridget Somekh, David Smith of the John Clare Society, Tony Cooke & Mike Horne from the John Clare Countryside Project. Music was performed by the wonderful 'Frumenty'.

We were asked if 'Spring Gathering' will become an annual event, as so many people enjoyed it. The answer to that is Yes!

Pantaloons

The Pantaloons drama group will return to the John Clare Cottage this Summer with productions of *Alice in Wonderland* on 28 and 29 June, and Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* on 27 July. Further details will appear on the website clarecottage.org

RONALD BLYTHE MEMORIAL SERVICE



Ronnie at the Festival, 2011

Mike Mecham

One of the great joys of life is to know so many wonderful people – and I count it a great privilege to have known Ronald Blythe.

We met at so many Festivals in Helpston. I recall a delightful visit to Wormingford and I had the pleasure of attending the presentation of his CBE and then, recently, his Service of Thanksgiving at St Edmundsbury Cathedral. The service was a wonderful occasion with great hymns, wonderful readings and tributes. What made it even more significant was that it was designed by Ronnie himself. The readings included 'The Nightingales Nest' (John Clare) and

Ronnie's own reflection 'My Little Owls' read by Lady Clare, Countess of Euston and the King's representative in Suffolk. The final paragraph was typical of Ronnie's writing: 'The April happiness of finding so much promising. To have it all before one. Though not to count the days, but to let them bud and open; the weather to try everything on from gale to serenity; the pages of the current book to fall into chapters; the man from the British Museum to show Shakespeare in a handful of artefacts; and George Herbert to show us the church as only he can'.

The Cathedral choir sang beautifully: music by Bairstow (from the Song of Solomon); the Jubilate (music by his friend – Benjamin Britten) and Psalm 104. Psalm 104 is a hymn to the glory of God's creation. Other music included Imogen Holst's poco adagio from *The Fall of the Leaf* and organ music before the service and the voluntary allegro maestoso from Organ Sonata no.1 in G major, Op. 28, by Edward Elgar.

The hymns reflected Ronnie's deep faith: 'Hills of the north, rejoice', 'Jesu, the very thought of thee' and 'My song is love unknown'.

A lovely photo on the back cover of the Order of Service – Ronnie with his back to the camera seated in his garden and the quote: 'I sometimes think that God will ask us, "That wonderful world of mine, why didn't you enjoy it more?"'.

Canon Dr Ronald Blythe CBE FRSL helped us all to 'enjoy it more'!

Revd Ron Ingamells

Committee member Mike Mecham attended the service on behalf of the Society. Mike was particularly moved by Julia Blackburn's eulogy, which lovingly reflects Ronnie Blythe's humanity and sense of fun. Julia is a long-time friend of Ronnie and also an acclaimed, prize-winning, author of both fiction and non-fiction. Her 2011 Costa-shortlisted *Thin Paths: Journeys in and Around an Italian Mountain Village* will resonate with all of us who love Ronnie's *Akenfield*. Julia is the daughter of poet Thomas Blackburn and artist Rosalie de Meric. She lives in Suffolk. We are grateful to Julia for so willingly allowing us to publish her eulogy in full.

JULIA BLACKBURN: EULOGY FOR RONNIE BLYTHE

MEMORIAL SERVICE: ST EDMUNDSBURY CATHEDRAL, BURY ST. EDMUNDS, Wednesday 1 March 2023

I'll begin with a description of him:

Whenever I sat facing Ronnie at his elegant little table in the corner of the room, close to the crammed bookcases, I was always startled by the way his face changed. At one moment I saw a fragile man growing older year by year and in the next I saw a boy, filled with the laughter and energy of youth.

And now a little story which says something of his approach to life and to people. I was having lunch with him at his house, the wonderfully named Bottengoms. He'd recently been to see a friend who was dying. As a gift he chose the most expensive bar of soap he could find. Guerlain. 'She'll enjoy washing her hands, day by day,' he said. 'She's not got long to live.'

It's odd how one gets to know someone better, or at least in more detail, after they have gone. Ronnie was often in my mind ever since I first met him in 1991, but it's only now that I begin to see him in his entirety, as it were.

I watched a film made when he was in his 50s. The slight figure of a man with a shock of hair and very narrow hips, walking through the familiar streets of Aldeburgh and talking as he walks. 'So many friends have died,' he says, 'but I have no sense of elegy. They are living because I am living. That must be it.' And now he is living because we are living.

Last week I went back to Bottengoms, getting lost on the way as I always do and suddenly there was the big wooden post box with no name written on it and the anonymous, sandy and potholed track leading down and up and down again towards the house. You approach it across the garden with its perfect balance of the wild and the cultivated and here is the white painted front door to be pushed open.

The old house which had been his home, his island, since 1977. The paintings. The many books. The beautiful and precarious furniture that once belonged to John and Christine Nash – a flimsy multi-legged table looking as if it would collapse in a heap if you burdened it with the slightest touch – A bit of the ceiling bursting open to reveal a patch of wattle and daub, threatening to drop on your head – The tangle of copper heating pipes of which Ronnie was so proud that he insisted they ran above the mantelpiece like works of art.

But it was the floor that was most familiar and most moving. The wonderfully higgledy-piggledy pale brick floor that you sometimes still find in old churches: each brick a slightly different colour and height and no cement to hold them steady – and, with any luck a family of Great Crested Newts, sleeping peacefully somewhere underneath the layer of damp sand.

The first time I met Ronnie, we looked at the worn threshold to his house and at the floor, alive with the energy of time and he quoted a line from a Thomas Hardy poem, 'Here the dead feet walked in'.

Before the Service of Thanksgiving, I was talking to Ian Collins and he reminded me that on his very last day, Ronnie asked to be lifted to his feet, his bare feet, and then he stood on those bricks to feel them. It's such a wonderful last gesture of being.

We often sat and talked. He spoke of whatever he was currently working on, and he spoke about his friends, both the living and the no longer living, often telling vivid little stories about them that made me feel I knew them too. He was always a generous and enthusiastic critic of my books when they were still

in manuscript form and he imbued me with a courage that I will always be grateful for. Of course he did the same for many other writers.

Usually I came for lunch and left after tea, but once I stayed overnight, the two of us in our pyjamas taking turns to brush our teeth at the little sink before retiring – me to a memorably lumpy horsehair mattress.

In spite of our many conversations, I realise now that he hardly ever spoke of himself, apart from the occasional drift of nostalgia for what he felt he had missed in life, even though he did not explain quite what that was. He never once mentioned his childhood.

Ronnie was the eldest of six siblings – all of them sleeping together in the one room. One night when it was very cold, his father fetched a big bundle of straw and scattered it over his children, to keep them warm like piglets in a barn. His father was a farm labourer. Later he went up in the world and became a gravedigger. Ronnie's mother had been born into the even more dire inner city poverty of Covent Garden and it seems that she and her husband had little in common. He was a drinker and a shouter, while she was a devout and teetotal Christian. There were no books in the house apart from the King James Bible, but she read those musical cadences to her children from an early age and they became the foundation of Ronnie's appreciation of the immense power of the Word.

He left school age fourteen and got a job in Colchester Library where he could devour as many books as he liked. You could say his early years were a disadvantage, but in a way they were the making of him. He did not study authors; he met them and they became his friends and never mind if they had died two thousand years ago or took a cup of tea with him only last week.

The poet John Clare was his greatest love. They shared a knowledge of poverty and a loneliness of being and Ronnie always referred to him with such an easy intimacy, it was as if he was talking about his favourite brother, albeit one who did not have the same good fortune. Clare ended his troubled life in the madhouse, whereas Ronnie found peace and contentment and a sense of belonging, in the sanctuary that was Bottengoms.

If you look at the early photographs – and the later ones, right up to the party celebrating his one hundredth birthday – you can see why people were so drawn to him. As a young man he was as beautiful as a rather fragile matinee idol, and throughout his life he had a quality of openness and innocence and a way of trusting the path of his own destiny, which was very attractive.

Christine Nash met him in the Library and recognised something in him at once. She took him under her clever and wise wing and he became like the son that she and John Nash had lost. He was welcomed into the circle of their friends who were quick to appreciate his particular charm and intelligence. He was charming, but he also had a steely determination. He wrote as if his life depended on it and once he had begun that task, he never relinquished it.

Nine years ago I went to see Ronnie after the death of someone I had loved. I was seeking comfort, but to my surprise he apologised and said he could not be much help: he had never loved anyone deeply enough to have experienced the real, heart-breaking grief of loss.

At first I was shocked, but later I realised that what he said was not only honest, it was also a clue to his nature. He was, in the very roots of his being, a solitary man. He loved everything and everyone with an equal passion. He loved the moon moving through the night sky; the first light of the dawn; the natural

world in all its complexity. He loved landscapes and churches for the stories they held and told. And he loved people – all of them, equally, honestly and generously and yet with a certain detachment. Maybe that was the source of the nostalgia for what he felt he had missed

Ronnie seemed to get younger as he got older. He celebrated his 100th birthday with a glass or two or three of sherry, and a cake made as a copy of his last book, *Next to Nature*: and I heard he was delighted to be told that 10,000 copies had already been sold, although he quickly forgot the fact. He let go of life not many days after the party, taking his leave with a quiet acceptance and an easy joy.

He is of course best known for *Akenfield*, a wonderful and often shocking book that speaks so eloquently of a way of life that had evolved out of the landscape he was born into; a long tradition of rural poverty that was harsh and romantic and on the brink of vanishing; but I do wonder if his most recent writing is his greatest achievement. Like the 16th-century essayist Michel Montaigne, Ronnie had become able to follow the meanderings of his own thoughts as they moved from what he had for breakfast, to what Seneca said on hearing of his death sentence, to the cat, to the Holy Ghost, to a walk in the dark

Like Montaigne, Ronnie was not afraid of dying and I think he would have understood his own death, in the words of John Clare's poem 'I Am'. I remember him reading it to me at our first meeting:

I long for scenes where man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept,
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie
The grass below – above the vaulted sky.

Julia Blackburn



Mike Mecham adds: The Cathedral was decked in beautiful arrays of flowers. The congregation was invited to take some at the end, except the primroses which were going to be planted round Ronnie's grave. As I was leaving one of the flower ladies, perhaps knowing that I was from the Society and therefore shared a love of the poet with Ronnie, presented me with one of the potted primroses. It is now planted in my garden. I have matched a photo of it in my garden with one of Clare's

poems, 'The Primrose, A Sonnet' which is the first poem in Simon Kovesi's 2001 collection, John Clare, Flower Poems.



THE PRIMROSE A SONNET

Welcome pale primrose starting up between
Dead matted leaves of ash and oak that strew
The every lawn, the wood and spring through
And creeping moss and joy's darker green;
How much thy presence beautifies the ground,
How sweet thy modest unaffected pride
Glow on the sunny bank and wood's warm side,
And when thy fairy flowers in groups are found
The schoolboy roams enchantedly along,
Plucking the fairest with a rude delight,
While the meek shepherd stops his simple song
To gaze a moment on the pleasing sight,
O'erjoyed to see the flowers that truly bring
The welcome news of sweet returning spring.

John Clare

RONALD BLYTHE: A Life Well Written

The Slightly Foxed Podcast, episode 45

'I would like to be remembered as a good writer and a good man.... Writers are observers. We are natural lookers, watchers.... it seems to me quite wonderful that I have so long been able to make a living from something I love so much.'

So wrote the writer, editor and famed chronicler of rural life Ronald Blythe for the *Mail on Sunday* in 2004. That Ronald (or Ronnie, as he preferred to be known), who died aged 100 in early 2023, will be remembered as a good writer is irrefutable. Many *Slightly Foxed* listeners will know and love not only *Akenfield* – his bestselling 1969 portrait of a fictionalized East Anglian village – and the 'Word from Wormingford' column for the *Church Times*, but also his unparalleled collection of short stories, poems, histories, novels and essays and, most recently, his year-long diary published as *Next to Nature*, which celebrates the slow perpetual turn of the farming year, the liturgical calendar and the rhythms of village life.

In this podcast episode Ronnie's fellow writers and friends, Julia Blackburn and his biographer Ian Collins, lead us down the rough-hewn track to the ancient yeoman's cottage he inherited from the artist John Nash and into the nooks and crannies of his private world, tracing a life well lived and well written. We meet the changeling boy obsessed with books and nature and the self-taught youth whose good looks and charisma caused queues at the Colchester Library reference desk where he worked until he was discovered by the painter Christine Nash. It was she, recognizing his rare talent, who insisted he leave his job to pursue writing full-time. We track Ronnie's rich literary life path through his friends' personal recollections, touching on tales of mid-winter meetings with EM Forster and an unlikely tryst with Patricia Highsmith. We muse on his spirituality and sexuality, his great love for life and his deep connection to the rural world with all its harshness and all its beauty, before heading for Bottengoms Farm where we hear how this great man and great writer saw out his last days in the company of good books and close friends.

For our book-lovers' day out we head to the quintessential English cottage of Ronnie's hero, the poet and keen gardener John Clare. And, to finish, a round-up of book recommendations including another East Anglian delight in Adrian Bell's *A Countryman's Spring Notebook*, an unusual fishing memoir by the writer of the *Killing Eve* series that's about much more than *just* fishing, and the intricately plotted revenge tale *No Name* by Wilkie Collins, one of Ronnie's favourite writers.

To listen to this podcast, go to:

<https://foxedquarterly.com/ronald-blythe-a-life-well-written-slightly-foxed-podcast-episode-45/>



AN EVENING OF JOHN CLARE IN TRANSLATION



Inner courtyard of the Kunsthalle Osnabrück, with the exhibition 'Battlefield' on display

A flame nettle called 'Flame Thrower'. A rose named 'Géant des Batailles' ('Giant of Battles') in memory of Napoleon. A type of Brussels Sprout called 'Trafalgar'. John Clare would have appreciated the biting irony of the use of military terms and names for peaceful plants – a practice that is much more common than one would think. The Australian artist Gabriella Hirst has created a vivid documentary of this fact in her installation 'Battlefield' – a living collection of 173 plant varieties with names that reference theatres of war. Displayed as part of the exhibition 'Romanticism' in the inner courtyard of the Kunsthalle Osnabrück, this installation, as well as the exhibition as a whole, presented the perfect context for one of the first readings of selected prose and poetry by John Clare in a German translation.

The Kunsthalle Osnabrück, a museum of contemporary art, is located in the city of Osnabrück, Lower Saxony, in northern Germany. Its buildings are an old Dominican church and a modern square annexe with a courtyard in its middle. In 2022, it chose 'Romanticism' as the subject of its yearly exhibition, which set out to question the historic period from a contemporary point of view. Events accompanied this exhibition and allowed for discussion and engagement. One of these events was



The flame nettle with the name 'Flame Thower'.

the musical reading 'A language that is ever green' with texts by John Clare, organised together with the Literaturbüro Westniedersachsen (Bureau for Literature for Western Lower Saxony) on October 13th, 2022. The reading celebrated the first publication of a selection of Clare's poetry in German translation by Manfred Pfister (Verlag das Kulturelle Gedächtnis, Berlin: 2022). Only very



Violinist Dorothea Sack and actress Monika Vivell

few poems, spread over various anthologies, had been available in translation beforehand. The evening provided an introduction to Clare's life and writing, interspersed with music from his activities as a collector of folk ballads as presented in the excellent volume *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* by George Deacon. Prose and poems were read by the actress Monika Vivell, who also sang the ballads in the original English, accompanied by violinist Dorothea Sack. Jens Peters, Head of the Literaturbüro Westniedersachsen, provided the necessary background information so that a German audience would be able to contextualise the texts.

After a brief instrumental introduction, the start of the evening appropriately linked a view of the plants of the 'Battlefield' installation with a reading of an excerpt from Clare's autobiographical texts about his time as a soldier. Like the rest of the autobiographical texts chosen for this reading, this was translated by Esther Kinsky and published in the volume *Reise aus Essex* (Matthes & Seitz, Berlin: 2017). Vivell then recited the translation of 'Clock a Clay' and closed the section with the ballad 'O would I were a little bird'. The main part then presented readings of the poems 'Trespass', 'The Mores', 'The Badger', 'I am' and 'All Nature has a Feeling' as well as excerpts from Clare's autobiographical prose 'My first attempts at poetry...' and his Letter to Matthew Allen, ca. 27 August 1841. In between, Vivell and Sack performed the ballads 'taken from my fathers singing', 'Oceans Glories – Tune "Old Benbow" a beautiful melodie' and 'Another with a fine Melody taken from my fathers singing'. Both Pfister's and Kinsky's translations choose a German that evokes the 19th Century while remaining accessible for modern audiences. Vivell's evocative readings proved that the translations retain a rhythm and musicality that truly lifts them off the page. Overall, the reading 'A language that is ever green' and its special setting in dialogue with contemporary art in the Kunsthalle Osnabrück was well received by the German audience. It is to be hoped that the increasing number of German translations of Clare's texts will elicit further readings and performances and contribute to a greater dissemination of this important voice of English Romanticism.

Text: Jens Peters
Photos © Lev Zilber

JOHN CLARE'S CHAIR



In 1940, my family moved to the old rectory at Northborough, where I was born. My father, CL McAllister, was a squadron leader in the RAF and involved in setting up radar stations during the latter part of WWII. Maxey House at Market Deeping had been used by the RAF during the war years and the contents of the house were sold off at the end of the war in 1945; this was when my parents purchased the chair.

Within the village of Northborough, the chair was known as the John Clare chair by several locals. Two families were convinced of this; both families had the surname 'Field'. One of the families lived in Lincoln Road and I was friends with their son Tony. Tony's grandmother (Mrs York, maiden name Clare) lived two houses along from Tony. The other family lived in a stone cottage in Church Street in Northborough and the father worked for the Garford family of Castle Farm. Both families spoke fondly of the chair and its provenance.

A cottage at the end of Paradise Lane in Northborough was also referred to by locals as one of the homes John Clare had resided in during part of his life.

The chair stayed with my family at the Northborough Rectory until 1953. Prior to my family owning the chair, it had clearly undergone attempts at restoration, as there are wooden fixtures under the seat, but my family have never attempted to repair the chair in any way – we just wished to enjoy a beautiful piece of furniture and its link with John Clare.

In 1953 my mother and I moved elsewhere in Northborough, until 1960 when we moved into Rectory Cottage in Peakirk. Each time we moved, the chair was packed up and transported with us. At Rectory Cottage in Peakirk we did not have sufficient space to display the chair, but Dr Tony Barling, who resided in the main house with his family, kindly offered to temporarily house the chair for us, where it had pride of place beside his telephone. In 1974 the chair came with my own family to Braceborough, then Swaton, before finally ending up in New Zealand when we emigrated in 1981.

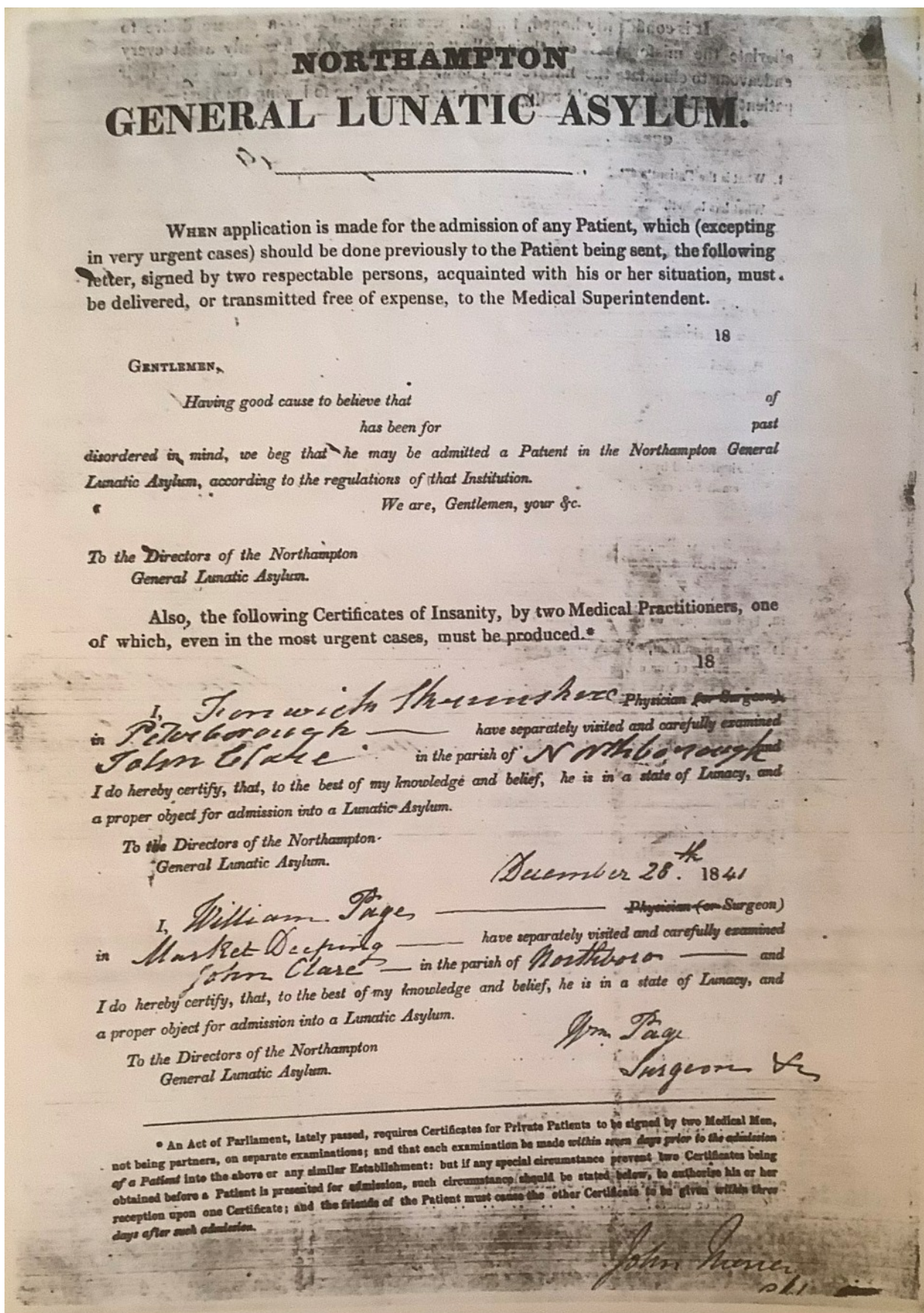
I've always had complete and utter faith in the conversations from my youth that this chair is indeed the 'corner chair' which John Clare recalls in his poem 'The Flitting'. Its condition is not perfect, but the last repair attempts are at least 85 years old.

My dearest wish is that the chair be returned to England where it can be appreciated as a part of English history and the deep connection it has with one of England's greatest poets.

John H McAllister

JOHN CLARE'S MENTAL HEALTH

The second page of this document, courtesy of the John Clare Society Archive, Northamptonshire Record Office, was omitted from the last Newsletter and is reprinted here. Readers of the e-mail edition will have the other two pages reprinted.



It is confidently hoped, that all persons actuated by a sincere desire to alleviate the misfortunes of their fellow creatures, will cheerfully assist every endeavour to elucidate the nature and causes of Insanity, and to this end, their patient attention is earnestly requested in replying to the following Queries:—

QUERIES.

ANSWERS.

1. What is the Patient's age? 49.
2. What has been the Patient's usual employment? Gardening
3. What have been the Patient's general habits of living?
4. Is the Patient married, single, or widowed? married
5. How long since first married, or becoming widowed? 22
6. Has the Patient had any children? seven
7. What are the supposed causes of Insanity? hereditary
8. Was it preceded by any severe or long continued mental emotion or exertion? after years advised to Pictorial painting
9. Did it succeed any serious illness or accident affecting the nervous system? No
10. Is it consequent on pregnancy, parturition, or lactation?
11. Has it arisen from, or been accompanied by, any irregularity of the uterine functions?
12. How long is it since symptoms of aberration were first detected? fourteen years
13. Is the present the first distinct attack? has had several
14. How many separate attacks have preceded it?
15. When were indications of the existing attack first noticed? seven years ago
16. Of what continuance are the intermissions, what their character, and intervals of recurrence?
17. Does any constitutional or hereditary prediagnosis exist in the family of the Patient to maniacal, nervous, or scrofulous affections? yes as above
18. If so, is it on the maternal or paternal side; and what degree of relationship exists between the branches in question and the Patient?
19. Does the Patient labour under epileptic, paralytic, contagious, or other bodily disorders? No
20. Has the Patient ever attempted or threatened violence to self or others? No

QUERIES.

ANSWERS.

21. Is the Patient idiotic, mischievous, or dirty?
22. Has the Patient ever been placed in any other Asylum, and if so, Where? When and how long since his or her removal?
23. Has the Patient been under medical treatment. If so, Whose, and how long since?
24. Has the Patient suffered any relapse since the commencement of this attack?
25. What is the proposed rate of payment?

No.
Allens Asylum
High-beach Essex
Escaped in July last.

Likewise the following obligation by a responsible person:—

18

GENTLEMEN,

Upon your admitting *into*
the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, as a Patient, I hereby bind and oblige myself to pay
the board fixed by you for the said *to remove*
when required to do so by you; to bury *in case of death; to keep up a proper stock of*
necessaries, as mentioned in a printed card delivered to me, and to renew them when destroyed or worn
out; and if the aforesaid necessaries, or any of them, are not furnished when required by notice, in
writing, from the Superintendent of the Asylum, the Directors or their Committee may, in ten days
after such notice, order these necessaries to be provided at my expence, which I hereby bind and oblige
myself to pay; and generally to fulfil all the obligations required by the Regulations of the Institution.

I am, Gentlemen, your &c.

*To the Directors of the Northampton
 General Lunatic Asylum.*

When a Patient is admitted, the board, to be determined by the Committee, before whom the Superintendent will lay the above Certificates, Obligation, &c.—shall be paid in advance to the Treasurer, until next quarter day; and afterwards in advance, quarterly, on the 1st day of January, the 1st of April, the 1st of July, and the 1st of October.

The following is the present rate of Board, Washing, Medical advice, and Medicines:—

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| First Class, £.1 11s. 6d. per week. | Fourth Class, 12s. per week. |
| Second Class, £.1 1s. 0d. per week. | Fifth Class, 9s. " |
| Third Class, £.0 15s. 0d. " | |

In Special cases of First Class Patients requiring extraordinary attendance and accommodation, terms higher than the above may be proposed by the Superintendent, subject to the approval of the Committee at their next meeting.

JOHN CLARE: NATURE, TRADITION AND CHANGE Part 2.

The Ronald Blythe Centenary Lecture

The John Clare Festival, Helpston, 16th July 2022

Part 1 of this Lecture was printed in the February 2023 Newsletter

When we think of tradition we also think of culture, and Clare has a great deal to say, in both his poetry and prose, about the cultural traditions that had shaped his sense of a village community. As with 'The Nightingales Nest' and other nature poems, what often comes across very strongly is a sense of excitement and anticipation. For instance, in his catalogue of the festive year:

then came valentine tho young we was not without loves we had our favourites
in the village and we listend [for] the expected noises of creeping feet and the
tinkling latch as eagerly as upgrown loves w[h]ether they came or not it made
no matter dissapointments was nothing in those matters then the pleasures of
anticipation was all

(By Himself, p. 35)

And again in the poem 'Valentines Eve':

Young girls grow eager as the day retires
& smile & whisper round their cottage fires
Listning for noises in the dusky street
For tinkling latches & for passing feet
The prophecys of coming joys to hark
Of wandering lovers stealing thro' the dark
Dropping their valentines at beautys door
With hearts & darts & love knots littered o'er
(Midsummer Cushion, p. 23)

As the prose makes clear, anticipation is all, and it did not matter, even if no card were slipped through the door. This is absolutely a child's point of view, reflecting a sensibility that can achieve a level of excited anticipation quite forgotten by the adult world, one that accepts experience as a continuum that is not necessarily dependent on an outcome or a result. But the excitement also reflects the dynamic I am exploring here, the tension between the hope of a recurring tradition, and the possibility that it will not happen.

In this light, two related poems I have long been interested in and have looked at in some detail are relevant here because although they deal with the same traditional event, a Martinmas feast, they have completely different focuses. Admittedly the first one, 'Martinmas Eve' is unfinished, and one of the two extant manuscripts calls it 'Michaelmas Eve', which would be a different event, two months earlier in the calendar. Martinmas is 11 November and Michaelmas 20 September; different feast-days, albeit with some common factors in their social meaning and celebration. Michaelmas may be described as the beginning of the natural autumn, Martinmas the beginning of natural winter. Both often had hiring fairs and so might mark the beginning or the end of a hiring term for farm servants. This is important because 'Martinmas / Michaelmas Eve', the unfinished or abandoned earlier poem, even in its rough, unfinished form, presents us with a nice social comedy around adult children returning from service, who now have sweethearts, and with huge delicacy must negotiate with their parents both their new status as adults, and the entry of their new loved ones into the family circle. It is a shame that Clare

abandoned it, though perhaps we can see that he had done enough before he turned away.

In the poem, the returning son wants to impress his father with his wages and prospects, leading up to the fact that he wants to wed; both parents have of course already guessed where this is leading, and the mother intervenes with a rather stiff speech about marriage:

The mother then thinks proper to remark
That early marriage hastens on distress
By 'creasing familys — but neer the less
Leaves em to take their choice — still as a friend
Warns em gen noodles that love more to dress
Then sit a stocking or a shirt to mend
As such like things woud stroy all they can rap & rend

(*Early Poems*, II, p. 481)

We see interesting evidence of Clare's composing technique here, visible because it is an unfinished draft. To keep the metre regular, he ruthlessly shaves off prefixes and suffixes, all presumably meant to be cleaned up later. But the sound and rhythm come first for him, as when he once wrote of measuring out a ballad he was writing 'wi the thrumming of my mothers [spinning] wheel' (*Letters*, p. 65)

Food and drink loosen the atmosphere, but the daughter has actually brought her sweetheart home with her, and this takes even trickier negotiation, with a long dramatised speech from her about how she only brought him because he carried her things, and she would have certainly got lost in the dark. Meanwhile he cannily waits outside the cottage, diligently over-cleaning his boots until he knows the family light has, so to speak, turned from red to green:

Others more late oer taken in the night
By safer means the dames good humour wins
Wi mirey roads & many a woeful plight
Soon as they enter re[a]dily begins
& shows how theyre near battld to their chins
& had not partners helpd em on their way
How theyd bin lost as sure as pins is pins
Who cleans their shoes without in wishd delay
Sneaking behind till known what the old folks will say
At length alls right & every hearts at rest...

(*Early Poems*, II, pp. 481-2)

'St Martins Eve', the later poem, is an attempt to re-boot this 'failed' poem, Clare tells us, and in fact takes a character from the earlier poem, 'poor Kate in the dumps', a silent girl for whom life has badly gone wrong, a minor figure in the early poem, and puts her at the centre of 'St Martins Eve' (see *Middle Period*, III, pp. 269-78, and *John Clare and Community*, pp. 149-68). Yet it is striking how differently he approaches a festive occasion in autumn from one poem to the other. I have written a lot about this second poem so will be brief. The young are centrally involved, certainly, and perhaps some are returned from service, but that theme has basically vanished from 'St Martins Eve', replaced by a sense of manic celebration and fun-making, in games, practical jokes (some quite cruel), music, dancing and storytelling, as the wind roars outside.

What seems evident to me looking at these kinds of poems is that cultural traditions are a kind of reassurance to Clare, a structure, a scaffolding within

which he can exist and find sanity, while safely embracing variety, surprise, the improvisational and the unexpected, and periodical changes, such as children coming of age and rather awkwardly bringing home their new sweethearts, even reversals. But when the tradition is taken away or seriously undermined, either by external events, or arising from his own alienation and anguish, his writing describes a much more difficult and dangerous world. I have suggested that this structure of cultural tradition is tied to Clare's own identity and sense of self, and I want to look a little further at this. He wrote an intriguing short essay on 'Self-Identity' which begins:

A very good commonplace counsel is *Self-Identity* to bid our own hearts not to forget our own selves & always to keep self in the first place lest all the world who always keeps us behind it should forget us altogether — forget not thyself & the world will not forget thee — forget thyself & the world will willingly forget thee till thou art nothing but a living-dead man dwelling among shadows & falsehood (Prose, p. 239)

It is all too easy to lose oneself, by this counsel. The shepherds in one Clare poem, 'almost wonder where they dwell' when a little autumn mist creeps in (*Major Works*, p. 266), and there are much worse ways of getting lost in Clare's world. The self-identity essay plainly, and verbally, foreshadows a much more famous piece of writing, from 1848, 'I Am', a poem written after he had spent more than ten years in asylums:

I am — yet what I am, none cares or knows;
My friends forsake me like a memory lost:—
I am the self-consumer of my woes;—
They rise and vanish in oblivion's host,
Like shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes:—
And yet I am, and live — like vapours tost

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,—
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my lifes esteems;
Even the dearest, that I love the best
Are strange — nay, rather stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes, where man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled or wept
There to abide with my Creator, God;
And sleep as I in childhood, sweetly slept,
Untroubling, and untroubled, where I lie,
The grass below—above the vaulted sky.
(*Major Works*, p. 361)

Shadows and falsehood are all that Clare can see, when what I have called the scaffolding, the structure of familiar cultural traditions and places, are removed from his life. And yet he still has that one great resource of poetry with which to express his dismay and to try to rebuild the 'memory lost' of his life. I always think that one of the small miracles of Clare's surviving canon is the fact that just a year after that darkest of dark poems appeared, so did one of his lightest and happiest verses:

Little trotty wagtail he went in the rain
And tittering tottering sideways he near got straight again
He stooped to get a worm and look'd up to catch a fly
And then he flew away e're his feathers they were dry

Little trotty wagtail he waddled in the mud
And left his little foot marks trample where he would
He waddled in the water pudge and waggle went his tail
And chirrupt up his wings to dry upon the garden rail

Little trotty wagtail you nimble all about
And in the dimpling water pudge you waddle in and out
Your home at night at hand and in the warm pigsty
So little Master Wagtail I'll bid you a 'Good bye'.

(Major Works, p. 401)

To rediscover who he is, Clare constantly looks outwards, to observe the details of nature, tiny moments like the happy sight of a wagtail playing in a puddle, in order to find a harmony, a normalcy, a pleasure in the world around him. Even in the 'Journey Out of Essex', the extraordinary prose account he wrote of his walk home from High Beach in 1841, in which he is clearly struggling with a considerable degree of delusion, he finds tiny moments of solace and sanity in the details he describes of small things around him, of clover trusses he can sleep in, or a passing wagon from which a coin is tossed to him, giving him the chance of a bit of bread and cheese.

But perhaps the most wonderful example of his re-creation in re-creating traditions and cultural expectations that are lacking in his life is a poem he wrote almost at the end of it, in 1860. He had now been in asylums for over twenty years and could hardly avoid being thoroughly institutionalised within this closed world. This poem, however, rolls it all back, and re-creates the world of Helpston, and the childhood in which he once 'sweetly slept'. It does so in a wonderfully ambiguous way, because it is entitled 'To John Clare', and begins with the question, 'Well honest John how fare you now at home?' But which John Clare? What part of his identity? Is it himself, imagined as being back home? Or himself in childhood, as the poem seems to suggest in its child-centred description? His son John Clare, even? Or is this an idealised John, a platonically 'Honest' John living in an eternal village of youth and sunshine and happy memories? This is the poem, and I'll end with it:

Well honest John how fare you now at home
The spring is come and birds are building nests
The old cock robin to the sty is come
With olive feathers and its ruddy breast
And the old cock with wattles and red comb
Struts with the hens and seems to like some best
Then crows and looks about for little crumbs
Swept out bye little folks an hour ago
The pigs sleep in the sty the bookman comes
The little boys lets home close nesting go
And pockets tops and tawes where daisies bloom
To look at the new number just laid down
With lots of pictures and good stories too
And Jack the jiant killers high renown

(Major Works, p. 427)

This is re-assertion of identity with a vengeance, even if we are not quite sure *whose* identity, which John, it is. It is a deliberative return to the unselfconscious straightforwardness of childhood play, the ordinariness of village life, taking pleasure in nature and the resurgent spring (with a cock robin and a rampant cockerel to suggest another sort of arousal). The dozing pigs and the children's sweeping chores are the epitome of normalcy and harmlessness. And then finally comes the wonderful world of books with the figure of the chapman, trumping all other childhood pleasures, as toys are hastily put away and games swiftly abandoned. These books are of course cheaply printed and do not need cutting open like those in the poem 'Pleasures of Spring', just the requisite penny. And they are full of pictures, not just 'good stories too', for 'what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?', as Alice well remarks. And the chapbooks enable the poet to end his sonnet on a defiantly triumphalist note, with yet another John, a famous chapbook hero: Jack the Giant Killer. Clare has powerfully pressed back in a final act of resistance to his long confinement and the gradual shrinking of his world, by imagining something better, some touchstone, as he so often did in his writing. It might be childhood play, or opening the world of fresh ideas in a new book, or marvelling at minute details in the natural world. He might dream of flight with the skylark, walk eighty miles home and record the journey, or celebrate the varied pleasures of village festivity and seasonal cycles, those 'scenes obscure so near and dear to me' (*Major Works*, p. 2), as he once called them.

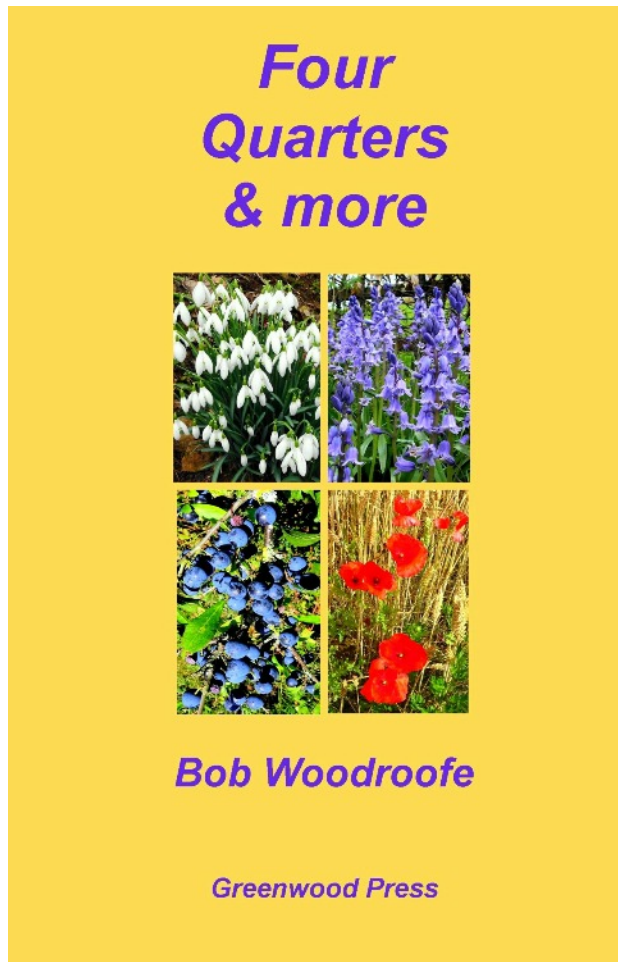
John Goodridge

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BOB WOODROOFE: *Four Quarters & more.*

Greenwood Press. 2023. 56pp.



Bob Woodroffe divides the poems in this latest volume into five sections: Nature & the elements, Life & love, Seasons, Inspirations and Amusements. Many of the poems in his previous volume (2017) were concerned with rural life in his particular area – the west country. In the present book the natural scenes are more generic, and the relationships more anonymous, but this does not make them any less detailed or moving. The poems in the first section are vignettes of little scenes: autumn leaves floating down a stream, snails clustered round a hogweed after it has flowered. In 'Glass case' he describes the 'special moment' as the light and wind catch frozen branches, incorporating a lovely extended musical metaphor to convey the synaesthesia of sight and sound.

Bob's poetry usually sends me scurrying for online enlightenment at one, or even several points. In the Inspirations section I was perplexed by the title 'Farewell to Pripchat'. This, I learned, is the title of a song by the Irish folksinger, Christy

Moore, from which Bob quotes a striking simile:

Like the shirts sheets and handkerchiefs
that crack in the wind.

His poem doesn't have the darkness of Moore's song (about the nuclear disaster of 1986), since he is describing the efforts of a swan taking to the air, and it is only the final lines that refer to Pripchat (or Pripyat). I don't think I'd have grasped their significance without having read the lyrics of Moore's song.

There are darker moments in these poems, but I was struck by how often darkness gave way to light; I felt that there was a spirit of optimism infusing Bob's work. For instance, in 'Imbolc' (St Brigid's Day, 1 February. I had to look that one up!), the emphasis is on the signs of spring rather than the passing winter, or in 'Shortest' he looks to the eventual lengthening of days, rather than dwelling on their shortening. The final section, subtitled 'A look at the the [sic] lighter side of life', finishes the volume in high spirits. These poems are clever and amusing, demonstrative of Bob's fascination with words. 'A word from Wincy' takes us into the world of the spider, 'The Octopus Carpenter' marvels at the workings of a robot, and 'BeerWolf' is a compilation of phrases to describe a beer drinker: a useful resource for the solver of cryptic crossword puzzles!

Valerie Pedlar

For further details go to www.greenwoodpress.co.uk.

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY - 2023 FRIENDS OF FESTIVAL BOOKING FORM

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|--|--|
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| Address (please print) | |
| Email address if available: | |

Please complete as applicable:

| Please tick | Item | No. | Cost |
|---------------------|--|------------|-------------|
| | Friend of 2023 Festival (£15.00 per person) to include a printed programme and Alan Cudmore's new book about Ronald Blythe <i>Journeys to Helpston</i> . The Programme and any Concert tickets will be posted to you in advance of the Festival and the book may be collected from the Festival Welcome Tent on Saturday 15 July | | |
| | Priority booking and reserved seat for the Saturday evening Concert (The Big Fiddle Band) 7.00 pm in St Botolph's Church (£7.00 per person) | | |
| | I would like both the programme and book posted to me. Please add an extra £1.00 to cover postage | | |
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- This completed form, along with a cheque made payable to The John Clare Society, should be returned to Sue Holgate, 9 The Chase, Ely, Cambs CB6 3DR, by 30 June 2023. Tel. 01353.668438
- Or the form may be emailed to smholgate@outlook.com and BACS payment sent to The John Clare Society, Barclays Bank, Sort Code 20-07-82; Account Number 50275239 putting your Surname and FOF23 as the reference.

THE JOHN CLARE SOCIETY

SALES ORDER FORM 2023



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 and items on Clare.

You can email an order or question to me. We are able to accept online payment, also PayPal and debit/credit cards for payment via email. Orders by post and cheque still welcome.

Full address and ordering information on the order-form.

David

David Smith, Sales Officer

BOOKS 2023

| CODE | ITEM | PRICE | WEIGHT |
|-------------------------------|--|---|-----------|
| B20129 *New* | Journeys to Helpston: Ronald Blythe and the John Clare Society. By Alan Cudmore Illus & photos | £6.00 | 160g |
| B20023 | <i>a JCS book:</i> John Clare: New Approaches rrp £7.95 ed. J Goodridge & S Kövesi ppr (essays on Clare) | £4.00 | 400g |
| B20028 | John Clare, the Northamptonshire Poet ed. JL Carr (p/b pocket size poetry book) rrp £2 | £1.50 | 20g |
| B20128 | Love's Cold Returning: Hall & Somekh. Ppr rrp£20 | £18.00 | 900g |
| B20033 | <i>a JCS book:</i> The Wood is Sweet Poems selected by David Powell, illustrated by Carry Akroyd rrp £7.99 ppr | £6.25 | 200g |
| B20115 | <i>a JCS book:</i> This Happy Spirit poems selected by RKR Thornton & Carry Akroyd. Ilusts. by Carry Akroyd Ppr rrp £8.99 | £7.25 | 200g |
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| B20114 | John Clare, A Poet for all Seasons rrp £15.99 By Peter Moyse hdbk, many colour photographs | £5.25 | 500g |
| B20124 | OUP: John Clare Selected Poems Ox. Std Txts. rrp £12.99 | £12.00 | 300g |
| B20116 | John Clare: A Collection of Songs, Airs and Dances for Violin (1818) ed. Tony Urbainczyk , vols 1 & 2: | Vol 1: £10 Vol 2: £14 Incl. Post limited stock | |
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| B20119 | A John Clare Flora Molly Mahoud ppr, colour photographs rrp £14.99 | £17.50 | Incl.post |
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| B20122 | Torpel Manor: The Biography of a Landscape by F Gosling, SP Ashby & A McClain. ppr | £12.50. | Post free |
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JOHN CLARE SOCIETY JOURNALS

| | | |
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| 1982-2019 Journal | As available (some no-stock years). Please enquire for years wanted | £3.50 each Post free |
| B20125: | John Clare Society Journals, 2020 & 21 & 22 (Special Extended Editions) State which dates required | £4.00 each Post free |
| | Journal Index (1982-2011) | £2.00 post free |

MISCELLANEOUS/BOOKS/CDs/DVDs 2023

| | | | |
|---------------|---|----------------|-----------|
| M20071 | <i>In Clare's Footsteps.</i> map of Helpston with notes Unlaminated, folded to A5 as above: laminated, flat A4 | £0.30 £1.00 | 5g 25g |
| M20092 | John Clare leather bookmark , gold on dark green. | £2.00 | 10g |
| M20031 | JCS gummed labels 100 labels in pack. | £0.65 | 150g |
| M20028 | Tea-Towel - Scenes from Helpston: High Quality Cotton | £4.50 | Post free |
| B20030 | The Ballad of John Clare by Hugh Lupton. pprbk | £9.00 | 312g |
| M20061 | DVD: John Clare , A 65min photographic journey with poetry readings by Peter Moyses | £5.50 | 140g |

| | | | |
|-------------------------------|---|--------|------|
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| M20062 | CD: Clare's Journey. A musical journey through his life. Sung by Maida Vale Singers. Composer: Terence Deadman. Lyrics by Trevor Harvey. | £3.00 | 140g |
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| M20063 | CD: Toby Jones reading + music arranged by Julian Philips Melodys of Earth and Sky rrp£12.99 | £12.00 | 140g |
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| P20031 | | |
| P20032 | The John Clare Rose | £0.25 |
| P20103 | The Midsummer Cushions around Clare's grave | £0.25 |
| P20104 | John Clare's grave (illustration) | £0.25 |
| P20105 | John Clare's Memorial, Westminster Abbey | £0.25 |

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2023

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|--------------------|-------|--------|------------|
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| 101-250g | £2.15 | £4.50 | £6 |
| 251-500g | £3.25 | £5.50 | £10.50 |
| 501-750g | £4.10 | £7 | £12.50 |
| 751-1000g | £5.50 | £9 | £15 |
| 1001-1250g | £6.00 | £10 | £18 |
| Greater than 1251g | £9.00 | £13 | £22 |

To work out cost of p&p for your order, note the weight given in grams for each item in the weight column on the ORDER FORM below. Total up and find price for this weight in above table. **(note: some items listed as Incl.post/post free)** *post may vary

| CODE | ITEM | PRICE | WEIGHT |
|---|------|-------|--------|
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| | | | |
| Total purchase price and total weight | | | |
| Add p&p from table for the total weight | | | |
| TOTAL PAYMENT | | | |
| Bank Transfer or Paypal also available, enquire via email. | | | |
| <i>I enclose a cheque (sterling) payable to The John Clare Society for £</i> | | | |
| NAME: | | | |
| Date | | | |
| ADDRESS: | | | |
| POST CODE | | | |
| In case of problem or query, please add mobile/ phone number | | | |
| and/or e-mail address: | | | |
| Return to: Sales Officer, John Clare Society, 3 Astwick Road, Stotfold, Hitchin, SG5 4AP Tel: 01462 631285 e: djsapt@gmail.com | | | |