



# Newsletter

Volume 3, January 2001

## 2000 MLA Panel on Clare in Washington D.C.

On December 28, 2000 the JCSNA sponsored the first John Clare panel at the MLA Convention under our new status as an Affiliate Organization of the MLA. The session, "Expanding the Clare Canon," chaired by Alan Vardy of Hunter College, featured papers by Eric Robinson, Sara Lodge of University College and Lady Margaret's Hall, Oxford, and John Coletta of the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point.

Eric Robinson's paper, "Clare's 'April-Fooling' in the Northborough Period," took seriously the mandate of the panel, literally expanding the Clare canon by discussing a hitherto unpublished poem of 280 lines beginning, "Up crows the cock with bouncing brawl." By examining the poem and its cultural contexts, Robinson demonstrated that the April-Fool pranks of village life were fraught with anxiety. The poem explores feelings of isolation, frustration and impotence, and reveals currents of sexual cruelty imbedded in the seeming 'play' of April-Fool's Day.

Sara Lodge's paper, "A Life Outside: Clare's Mole-Catcher," offered a fascinating discussion of the cultural tensions at play in Clare's poem. The "life outside" of Lodge's title refers to the seasonal release of the mole-catcher from the workhouse into his summer occupations of mole-catching, mushroom gathering, etc. Such occupations were under threat from the reorganization of rural property that restricted the free movement of such figures and reduced the opportunities for 'catch-laboring.' Lodge offered a particularly lucid reading of Clare's use of the word "felons" in describing moles, showing how the mole represented a disruptive force on the landscape that aligned it with the newly criminalized sense of trespass that sought to constrain the mole-catcher himself.

*(continued on page 2)*

The editor invites submissions of items relevant to Clare studies, including calls for papers, announcements of recent publications, details of up-coming events, and scholarly notes. Send submissions to Sarah Zimmerman, Dept. of English, Fordham University, 113 W. 60<sup>th</sup> St., New York, NY 10023; or: [zimmerman@fordham.edu](mailto:zimmerman@fordham.edu)

## Call For Papers

Open Session, but with a special interest on the relationship between Clare and other laboring-class writers. One-page abstract by March 15 to Scott McEathron, Department of English, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, 62901-4503, or email to [mceath@aol.com](mailto:mceath@aol.com)

MLA 2000, continued
---------------------

John Coletta's paper, "Songs in Com-mon(s): Semiotics of Community in Clare's Lesser Narratives," took a more theoretical approach. Coletta developed a theoretical model he termed 'Renewable Historicism' drawing on C. S. Peirce's notion of the "interpretant" and arguing that Clare's narratives provide a source for developing such new ecological critical models. He offered the example of Clare's poem "The Wild Bull" as an instance in which the ecological value of the common is established outside purely human values. The wild bull creates ecological value without the impositions of human self-interest or critical interpretation.

Alan Vardy

UK Clare report for 2000
--------------------------

For Clare enthusiasts in the UK the millennium year began with the first of three London-area events. On January 20th two Clare books were launched at a special evening at King's College, London, organised by Nottingham Trent University's John Clare Forum. Tim Chilcott read four strongly contrasting pieces from his edition of Clare's 1841 writings, *John Clare: The Living Year 1841* (Trent Editions, 1999), and went on to discuss the amazing range and richness of the writings from what he has called this *annus mirabilis* in Clare's writing life, setting it against a background of Clare's mental anguish. Ronald Blythe (JCS President) then read from his essays and lectures, which have been gathered together in *Talking About John Clare* (Trent Books, 1999). On March 28th The John Clare Society and the William Blake Society held a joint meeting at the City of Westminster Archive Centre. Simon Kövesi of the Clare Society spoke on Clare and copyright, and David Worrall of the Blake Society spoke on Blake and nature.

Three days earlier on March 25<sup>th</sup> a successful 'John Clare day' had taken place at Earl's Barton, Northamptonshire, with talks on Clare in his context, Clare and botany and Clare and folk culture. The event ended appropriately with live folk music from the group 'Ock'n'Dough', keeping up a long tradition of Clare interest among British folk musicians.

For nearly 20 years Peter Moyse has been setting up his ever-evolving photographic exhibition on Clare in different places in the UK. (An early version of it in Newcastle University library was the reason I first joined the Clare Society.) Its latest version, 'John Clare, a Poet's Landscape,' was on display at Earl's Barton, Northamptonshire, in March, at the Gildenburgh Gallery in Peterborough in April, and in Southwell Minster, Nottinghamshire, from June to July. Peter reprinted his book of photographs of Clare country, *John Clare: The Poet and the Place*, last year.

On May 6th came the third London-area event. A group of Clare enthusiasts led by Peter Cox met at High Beach, Epping Forest, to walk the territory of Clare's first exile, in Matthew Allen's asylum from 1837-41. The nineteenth annual John Clare Festival took place in Helpston on July 15th, with talks by Ronald Blythe and Eric Robinson, and the usual pleasant mixture of walks, readings, displays and music.

March 1st 2000 saw the bicentenary of the publication of *The Farmer's Boy*, the major poem by Clare's key literary forbear and influence, Robert Bloomfield (1766-1823). This event was celebrated in a small ceremony on March 1st at Bloomfield's grave in Campton church-yard, Bedfordshire. It also led to a seminar held at the University of York on June 20th, entitled 'The Peasant Poet', with papers on Bloomfield and related topics by

John Barrell, John Goodridge, Donna Landry, Mina Gorji, Tim Fulford and Simon White. These will form the basis for a book of essays on Bloomfield which Simon White is now editing. Also timed to celebrate the bicentenary, the Robert Bloomfield Society was launched at a Clare Forum meeting at Nottingham Trent University on October 10th. A steering committee was established to get things going, and it is hoped that the Society will be open for business this Spring. A number of JCSNA members are involved in setting up the Bloomfield Society, including Bridget M. Keegan (prospective Chair), and William J. Christmas (prospective North American Representative).

The now well-established John Clare website, <<http://human.ntu.ac.uk/clare/>>, run by Simon Kövesi on the Nottingham Trent University server, has been more clearly organised, and has acquired a number of new essays, links and research pages. We have also now established a Robert Bloomfield website alongside it. There's not very much on it yet, but it will expand this year, as Bloomfield Society activity increases.

Although there was no Clare conference this year, some of our members attended the Hogg, Scotland and Romanticism conference at Strathclyde University in July, as a result of which a joint Hogg Society-Clare Society conference, long-mooted, will now take place at St Catherine's College, Oxford, on July 6th 2001. The 20th Clare Festival takes place in Helpston a week later, on July 14th, and the Bloomfield Society is planning a coach trip round 'Bloomfield country' in Suffolk later in July. Visiting JCSNA members will be warmly welcomed at these events.

On 17 November Paul Chirico led a session on Clare's poetry and prose in the Enlightenment and Romanticism Reading Group series of the University of London Institute of English

Studies (School of Advanced Study). On the same day a major essay by Paul on some newly discovered Clare letters appeared in the *Times Literary Supplement*. Paul is now a research fellow at Jesus College, Cambridge.

A book of essays from the 1998 Clare conference at Trent has now been published and will be available very shortly from the John Clare Society, with the title *John Clare: New Approaches*. Two other Clare books have been published in the UK this year: *John Clare: A Champion of the Poor*, ed. by P.M.S. Dawson and others (Carcenet / Mid-Northumberland Arts Group), a generous softback selection of his political writings, and *Itching After Rhyme: A Life of John Clare*, by Arnold Clay (Para Press), a nicely-produced hardback popular bio-graphy. Geoffrey Summerfield's selection of Clare has been re-issued this year as a Penguin Classic. There is an up-to-date listing of Clare articles, etc., on the Clare web page.

As John Clare Society archivist I get all sorts of interesting things sent to me by members. My main concern this year has been with the press coverage of the Clare copyright dispute, but I did notice one little gem among the cuttings. The *Peterborough Evening Telegraph* reported on February 2nd that the new 'Marymede' housing estate was being built in Helpston (slap-bang across Clare's beloved escape route, Crossberry Way, as it happens). The *Telegraph* reports that 'Marymede is so called because this is where peasant poet John Clare met and fell in love with Mary Joyce, the muse of his creativity'. Well, sort of! In fact they met at Glington school, three miles away, but if it alerts the estate's new residents to John Clare, then this romantic bit of 'instant heritage' will have served some purpose.

John Goodridge

[john.goodridge@ntu.ac.uk](mailto:john.goodridge@ntu.ac.uk)

## John Clare and Music

I'm sure that fans of John Clare know he was an avid fiddler, but I only recently had a chance to look over dozens of his favorite tunes. But probably less well known are the songs written to his poems. I first heard David Diamond's beautiful setting of "On Death" some fifty years ago.

When, not long ago I found a copy of Eric Robinson's choice collection, many of Clare's poems moved me a great deal, and I thought to set four of them to music myself. Over the decades I have written a dozen or so choral pieces with a *concertante* instrument or two—the best known of which is "Tom o' Bedlam" for chorus, oboe and tabor & jingles, which Robert Shaw premiered at Carnegie Hall in December 1953 and which received the N.Y. Music Critics Circle Award.

As I took my possession of Clare's poems which had taken me captive, it occurred to me that my "concertante" style would be suitable here also—rather than the conventional piano. My songs, however, are in the nature of duets for Lyric Baritone and Solo Cello—in musical language that might still be called 'modern music' (but not 'avant garde'). The titles are: "The Hollow Tree," "Where Castles Stood," "I'll Come To Thee At Eventide," "And Yet I Am."

They are self-published at our Howlet Press; the four songs run about 12 minutes, and would be suitable on a lieder recital by some courageous baritone. If you are one, or know one, do get in touch with me.

Jacob Avshalomov  
Howlet Press—Music  
241 S.W. Fairview Blvd.  
Portland, OR 97201

Phone/Fax 503-227-6919

[www.composers.com/avshalomov](http://www.composers.com/avshalomov)

## Letters to the Editor

During the summer months I'm employed at the local camp (Med-O-Lark) to teach poetry. I have a class of nine 14 to 16 year old students. Teach? Well—more or less talk about poets, style, and history. This year I thought I'd approach poetry as an expression of awe, discovered in nature, flat in our faces, always before us. I want to drive these kids out of their hormonal, middle-class angst and take them into that "fierce consciousness joined with final / disinterestedness," to quote Jeffers. One boy in the class, after reading Oliver's "Wilde Geese," said, "This is old and boring." I often wonder why some children take a poetry class when there's soccer and water skiing available? I'm not against sports. I used to play a lot of baseball and today I ride my bike regularly.

I spent some time this morning with the kids looking at Clare's "Heavy Dew." It's a great example of detail totally void of generalities. The imagery of the last line plunges the reader back into Clare's energized world with a happy dog that "snorts and barks and brushes on again." The sensuality of the poem is enough to send the reader racing for a wet field. Yesterday, when we did a quick read of five poems, another boy said about Clare's "Heavy Dew," I didn't understand a word I read." I *had* to work that poem in detail today. I had the kids write—'Praise of something in the world of nature that is not commonly praised.' I refused to accept anything that sounds sentimental or false—no hormonal angst. Except for one boy, the group does not seem to mind my tough approach. Actually, I was impressed with their effort.

Sincerely,  
George V. Van Deventer

## Recent Publications

I wish to draw the attention of our readers to the extremely valuable Ph.D. thesis (“Looking to Futurity”: John Clare and Provincial Culture,” Birkbeck College, University of London, 1999) by Robert Heyes, who has delved much more deeply than other Clare scholars into the collection of Clare’s *incoming* correspondence in the British Library (Egerton mss. 2245-50). He has worked extensively upon the Peterborough and the Northampton mss. as well as a variety of other sources described in his bibliography. Not only is this thesis essential for the accurate dating, and redating, of the letters received by Clare, but it also gives useful suggestions for, and corrections of, some of the dates for poems published in the OET *Clare*. Dr. Heyes has been most generous in providing help for other Clare scholars on a variety of matters but the thesis affords numerous new insights.

It is particularly valuable for its analyses of Clare’s relationships with his friends: particularly J. B. Henson, E. B. Drury, O. G. Gilchrist, Frank Simpson Junior, Marianne Marsh, Mary Ann Mortlock, E. T. Artis and Joseph Henderson. Anyone making reference in their work to any of the above persons will find Heyes’ thesis an essential source. New material about contributions to Clare’s work made by Taylor, Hessey, and Henderson is especially valuable, though I do not agree with all the conclusions drawn.

In a letter to me Heyes tells me that he had to cut out many pages of material in order to meet the length-requirements for the thesis. It is to be hoped that he will be able to make this other stuff available to the rest of us. I recommend every university to acquire a copy of this thesis, if possible.

Eric Robinson

*Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology*. By James C. McKusick. Palgrave-St. Martin’s Press, 2000 / 256 pages / ISBN 0-312-23448-1 / \$45.00

This book describes the emergence of ecological understanding among the English Romantic poets, arguing that this new holistic paradigm offered a conceptual and ideological basis for American environmentalism. Coleridge, Wordsworth, Blake, John Clare, and Mary Shelley all contributed to the fundamental ideas and core values of the modern environmental movement; their vital influence was openly acknowledged by Emerson, Thoreau, John Muir, and Mary Austin. By revealing hitherto unsuspected links between English and American nature writers, this book elucidates the Romantic origins of American environmentalism.

The chapter on “The Ecological Vision of John Clare” will be of particular interest to readers of this newsletter. Examining the development of Clare’s “green language” over the course of his poetic career, this chapter argues that Clare engages ecological issues with remarkable precision, intensity, and breadth of vision. Indeed, McKusick seeks to demonstrate that Clare’s unique accomplishment in combining a profound sensitivity for natural phenomena with forceful environmental advocacy entitles him to be re-garded as the first authentically ecological writer in the English literary tradition.

*Literature and Nature: Four Centuries of Nature Writing*. Edited by Bridget Keegan and James C. McKusick. Prentice-Hall, 2000 / Paperback, 1136 pages / ISBN: 0-13-012241-6 / \$49.00

Bridget Keegan writes, “Jim and I got the idea for the anthology from our own experience in

teaching courses on Literature and the Environment. Most of the collections out there were either of nineteenth and twentieth-century literature, or of only American literature. We felt it important to show the transatlantic ‘cross-fertilization’ and the much longer date of the tradition of using poetry and fiction to explore humans’ relation to the natural world.

“As anyone who has studied Clare knows, Clare is influenced—even in his nature writing—by seventeenth-century poets such as Robert Herrick. And Clare and other Romantics also influenced twentieth-century American poets such as Theodore Roethke and Mary Oliver. We also tried to bring together some of the types of texts you’d expect (Wordsworth, Thoreau, Frost) with some pieces that don’t often make their way into collections (such as some less-familiar but still significant eighteenth-century loco-descriptive poetry, as well as early American travel narratives, and literature from the American South). We’ve tried too, to represent ethnic and class diversity—including the laboring-class tradition that Clare belongs to (including Duck, Collier, Leapor, Bloomfield)—along with works by African and Native American writers. We designed the anthology to be accessible to students, and, we hope, interesting to a more general audience. We hope that teachers, especially, will find the selections useful.”

*Literature and Nature* exposes students to the tremendous diversity of literary responses to the physical environment. The selections cover four centuries of the best nature writing produced in Britain and America from the Renaissance through the twentieth century. The book includes contributions by writers from all walks of life—men and women of different races, classes, and nationalities, each of whom adds a unique perspective to our

understanding of the literary representation of the natural world.

Contents include a variety of literary forms, including poems, short stories, non-fiction essays, travel narratives, and excerpts from novels. These varied selections reveal how concern for the environment cuts across differences of gender, social class, education, religion, race, and ethnicity. *Literature and Nature* provides a wide range of texts, from both well-known and less-familiar writers, and it offers students a broad base of knowledge from which to reflect and respond.

Instructors may obtain a complimentary examination copy of *Literature and Nature* from Prentice Hall. Phone 800-526-0485 or e-mail [english\\_service@prenhall.com](mailto:english_service@prenhall.com) and ask for ISBN 0-13-012241-6. An instructor’s manual is also available upon request.