



Newsletter

Volume 7, February 2005

The editor invites submissions of items relevant to Clare studies, including calls for papers, announcements of recent publications, details of upcoming events, and scholarly notes. Please send submissions to Andrew Hubbell: hubbell@susqu.edu. The editor would like to thank all of the contributors to this issue.

The Election of Society Officers

In accord with the bylaws of the John Clare Society of North America, the Board of Directors organized a mail ballot to elect new officers to five-year terms. We had a ballot return rate of 40%, which is very impressive for this type of election. A large majority of ballots (over 90%) were cast for the slate presented to the membership by the Board; and accordingly the following officers are now elected to five-year terms, effective August 1, 2004:

President: Eric Robinson
Vice President: Timothy Ziegenhagen
Executive Director: James McKusick

Thank you very much to everyone who voted! The new officers look forward to working closely with all members to advance the objectives of the John Clare Society of North America.

Proceedings of the John Clare panel at the Philadelphia MLA, 2005

By Dr. Timothy Ziegenhagen, Northland College

On December 28 at the Philadelphia MLA Convention, the John Clare Society of North America hosted a panel titled "New Perspectives on Clare and Nature: Ecology, Aesthetics, and Natural History." The 7:30 p.m. panel, chaired by professor Timothy Ziegenhagen, was well

attended by a diverse crowd of people brought together by their love of Clare and interest in literature and ecology.

Professor Alan Vardy of Hunter College, City University of New York, began with "Botanizing: Clare and Classification." Using a variety of primary sources, including Clare's natural history writings and watercolor field sketches, Vardy suggested that the poet adopts an ambivalent position in relation to the study of natural history. Clare, who was familiar with the Linnaean system of plant classification, "resists Latinate nomenclature even as he contributes to it." In his botanical descriptions, Clare exposes the superficiality of scientific classification, emphasizing the unique qualities of individual plants within a species—to the point where the differences between individuals in a species are as great as their similarities. Clare's botanizing, Vardy suggested, brings both science and art in the service of "ecological values," showing the infinite variety—and ultimately the uniqueness—of plant species. This variety indicates Clare's dynamic vision of the natural world, a vision in accordance with modern ecological principles.

Dr. Misty Beck, of Washington University in St. Louis, then read, “‘Homeless at Home’: Commonplaces in Wordsworth and Clare.” Beck’s paper explored how Wordsworth and Clare use the commonplace—the details of everyday life—as a way of creating a new kind of poetic authority. In Beck’s analysis, Clare owes Wordsworth a “debt” for having learned how to represent the experience of disenfranchised individuals, such as the female vagrant in the poem of the same name. But while Wordsworth relied more on literary texts for models of some of his itinerant figures than on direct experience (and Beck here cited Simpson’s work), Clare “extends” these modes of representation into a more realistic, less idealized portraiture. Clare adopts this new “clarity of vision” to also write about the day-to-day details of rural life, including commonplaces—his observations of Sand Martins, of rabbits, of plants—which enable him to explore the “collation of nature and poetry” and the relationship between the temporality of writing and “the eternity of nature.” Clare’s focus on the commonplace in Wordsworth, in other words, taught him to use details metonymically, and thereby to load that detail with rich significance, evoking the “contrast between an idealized past” and a present in accordance with his own direct experience.

There was a lively discussion following these two papers, and several audience members contributed commentary on Clare, natural history, romantic vagrancy, gypsies, and poaching. Many attendees lingered to continue discussion of Clare and his poetry even after the panel had adjourned.

John Clare and the Newspaper: the culture of the people

By Eric Robinson

There are not many writers more closely attuned to popular culture than John Clare. Perhaps because his parents were steeped in folk music, he was one of the very first collectors of Northamptonshire songs and dances. He memorized ballads and wrote down the dance tunes he played on his fiddle. He also rejoiced in nursery rhymes, old riddles, folktales, children’s picture-books of Tom Hickathrift, Jack and the Beanstalk, Guy of Warwick, and

many more — counting rhymes, proverbs and silly old jokes.

Clare also recorded all the local festivals in his village, Helpston: beating the parish-bounds, Valentine Eve, Harvest Home, and Morris-dancing. He detailed some of the less well known festivals such as Plough-Monday, when the local lads, daubed with blacking, hauled an old plough through the village and extorted drink and kisses; or the tossing of cowslip balls over a garland that hung from the chimney tops across the street; and the dumb-cake on St Mark’s eve when girls went silently to bed, placing onions under their pillows, to dream of the men they would marry. He rejoiced in fairs like Stamford’s, with its bull running, was familiar with the fox-hunts from the estates of the great houses and with badger baiting, of which he disapproved, but also celebrated the birds nesting that eventually made him one of the great ornithologists of his time.

Many of the old customs were also recorded in the local newspapers: the *Stamford Mercury*, *Drakard’s Stamford News*, the *Stamford Bee* and the *Stamford Champion*, to all of which Clare himself contributed, careless of their political leanings though probably more sympathetic in his heart to some than others. But because he lived with them, he celebrated these popular customs in a way that suggests he knew that he was chronicling them for future ages.

He loved newspapers, read them avidly, and was forever begging his friends in Stamford and in London to lend him copies of theirs. Thus he saw the *Times*, the *Observer*, the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Examiner*, the *Sheffield Iris* and the *Atlas* as well as the local papers. As a child, I learnt to read, sitting on my uncle's knee, from the local Taunton paper, and I'm sure that many people of my generation learnt to read this way, long before they ever saw a children's book. And why not? Those old papers were full of marvels — floods, earthquakes, outbreaks of cholera and plague, drownings, murders, and robberies. My grandpa Robinson in Sheffield told me tales of Charlie Peace, the burglar and master of disguise, of the murderer, Brides-in-the-Bath Thompson, of Dick Turpin, and of Springheel Jack—much more to my taste, I'm sure, than even Dr Seuss could have been. Besides, the papers were about *real people*, even sometimes those who lived next door and went poaching, or nutting, or collecting mushrooms in a farmer's field. Every crime story was a thrilling moral warning — and a temptation. Just as Clare knew the old sailor at the fair, who had a wooden leg from his service with Nelson, and now made a living by inviting people to shy a coin at it, so I, as a boy, knew the beggars in Taunton and the gypsies who came to the door, selling pegs, recaning chairs, mending pots and telling fortunes. Such people were also the source of a thousand stories in the narrow columns of the *Mercury* and the *News* that I now spend days hunting for in the archives of Stamford, Peterborough, Northampton, Manchester, Bristol and London. It gets a little harder for me now, at 80, to lift the heavy volumes onto the table so that I may read them, leaning awkwardly over the table.

All of this research reveals the hundreds of *languages* coexisting in newspapers— legalese from court cases, sermon-language, political propaganda, the slang of the streets, the dialects of funny stories, and the jargon of sports and crime — and the variety of visual media: engravings and woodcuts. In my day, it was the letters between Nat Gubbins and his stomach in the *Sunday Express*; in Clare's, it was stories of foolish schoolmasters, tyrannical magistrates and overseers of the poor, as well as the sly gamesters who conned the country folk out of their pennies or their goods.

How lucky Stamford is to have a newspaper that is still going after three centuries and that is still recording the ordinary life of common people!

Poetry for the People

By Eric Robinson

Recently I received a copy of an inspiring newspaper article titled 'Rhyme with a Reason' by Jacquie Price, published in the Northampton Chronicle and Echo for October 8, 2004. It describes how the Northamptonshire Literature Development Officer, Kate O'Brien, organized students from University College, Northampton, to give impromptu readings of John Clare poems to passersby in the center of Northampton.

'Volunteers were declaiming selected works of John Clare to passing shoppers outside All Saints Church, Waterstones [bookshop] in Abington Street, the Central Library, the Grosvenor Centre [an interior shoppingmall], Kingsthorpe Bookshop and Radio Northampton throughout the day.'

The students received an enthusiastic welcome in this celebration of National Poetry Day. I thought this was magnificent proof that Clare's

poetry does not belong to academics alone, but to all sorts of people and I wrote enthusiastic letters to Jacquie Price and to Kate O'Brien and the students about their efforts.

This prompted me to go back to Peter Cox's newsletters from the J.C.S. in England. I read there announcements of poetry readings, song-cycles, and exhibitions of prints, photographs, and books all related to Clare. There were also plays about Clare performed in theaters, schools, and on radio/television; a CD of a setting of Clare's 'O wert thou in the storm' by George Beckwith; articles and a booklet by Edward Storey to raise funds for his parish church; and a few important events organized by George Van Deventer and others up in Maine. There was even a cycling event along the road that Clare took when he escaped from a lunatic asylum in Epping Forest.

I know that we have American composers setting Clare's words to music and that we have at least one artist who has painted water colors of Clare's countryside. My wife, Victoria Robinson, and Tim White sang Clare songs at the Clare Conference in Baltimore in March 2003, and were enthusiastically received. I have given copies of Clare books to a Latino church in my neighborhood because I think that some of the congregation might enjoy them.

It would be nice to see such a flowering of interest in Clare here in North America, especially in the popular culture. If you would please send notes to the editor of this newsletter of all such events, they will be published in the next edition. Let's spread the word about Clare!

Sample of U. K. Clare Events, 2002 to 2004

2002

A cycling expedition along the route of Clare's 'Journey out of Essex'.

Oct-Nov 2002

Exhibition of Carry Akroyd's Clare illustrations at Loughton Library. A walk to High Beach in Epping Forest, poetry readings, singing of Clare songs, including Haydn Corri's setting of Clare's 'Here we meet too soon to part', and a talk by Peter Relph on the changes that have occurred in Epping Forest since Clare's time.

2003

A setting on a new CD, The English Tenor Repertoire, vol. 8, of Clare's 'O wert thou in the storm' by George Beckwith, sung by Gordon Pullin.

1 March 2003

Readings from Clare, Barnes and Hardy in Wimborne Minster, organized by Emma Trehane. Readings interspersed with fiddle and guitar music by Colin Thompson. Repeated in Stamford, May 2004.

June 2003

Kingston Choral Society presented a setting of The Shepherd's Calendar by Michael Hurd.

Oct 2003

Hull Ladies' Musical Union performed settings of Clare poems by Paul Ayres.

Dec 2003

Edward Storey raised funds for his parish church by publishing an article on Clare in the parish magazine and also a small volume of poems.

1 May 2004

Readings of Clare and Barnes at Oundle School in the Oundle Literary Festival.

July, each year

The Midsummer Cushions ceremony, organized by the John Clare School in Helpston, every July, has school children assembling their flower-spotted

rectangles of turf around Clare's grave.

7 & 13 July 2004

Mel Davison arranged a concert of Clare settings in Jersey, C.I. Plays about Clare by Edward Bond and Simon Rae performed in various places.

What else is happening that celebrates Clare? Please let us know!

Preservation of Swaddywell

(Excerpts adapted from U.K. article)

...Swaddywell, or Swordy Well, as it was known 200 years ago when John Clare grew up and worked as a farm labourer in the area, was once an area of natural beauty. So it is no wonder that local residents were furious when developers tried to turn it into a showground for car rallies eight years ago. But now, five local residents are working to restore the 30-acre site to its former natural glory in a way in which poet John Clare would have been proud.

Dr Richard Keymer, from Etton, near Peterborough, set up The Langdyke Countryside Trust to manage the project, and together with the other trustees, Stuart Irons, Mick Beeson, Chris Topper, and Richard Astle, who are all from Helpston, is working to establish Swaddywell Pit as a nature reserve that will one day be populated by hundreds of species of birds, insects, flowers, and plants.

Dr Keymer said, "The Langdyke Countryside Trust was set up with the view to trying to help preserve the natural heritage and biodiversity around the villages of Helpston, Bainton, Etton, Maxey, and Ufford," the heart of John Clare country.

"We wanted to protect not only the wildlife heritage, but also the buildings. In the early 20th century, Swaddywell was the site of one of England's first nature reserves, but during the First World War it was returned to farmland and a quarry. Then, during the 1980s, Swaddywell became a landfill site" and the large grass field at the top of the reserve caps many years of waste. "Then, more recently, it

was bought by a developer and used as a race track. There was a lot of anger among local residents about that, and when plans for the car rallies were abandoned, it lapsed into neglect and became a venue for occasional raves and fly tipping.

"Restoring Swaddywell was the primary motivation for setting up the trust to help restore the site to its former glory and turn it into a real community asset. We decided the best way to do this was to establish it as a nature reserve."

"But," Dr. Keymer continued, "the Trust isn't just about Swaddywell. We are looking at the countryside throughout John Clare country, and we really want the Trust to be a community organisation, with as many people as possible from the villages working together to protect and enjoy the local countryside. Already, we are getting a lot of interest, and on New Year's Day about 45 people joined us on a nature walk around Bainton Pits. We are also working with the John Clare Society and the John Clare School in Helpston to get young people involved too."

At the end of last year the Trust received a major boost from English Nature after being awarded a £28,000 grant from the Aggregates Levy Sustainability Fund (ALSF) to support its work at Swaddywell Pit.

The money will allow the trust to put up stock fencing around the site so that it can be grazed, which, as Dr Keymer explains “is one of the most effective ways of encouraging the regeneration of the typical flowers of limestone grassland. There are orchids growing on one area of the site, and we hope that, eventually, they will regenerate and flourish across the whole site.”

Among the many species of wildlife already thriving at Swaddywell Pit nature reserve are:

- > Great crested newts.
- > Bee orchids
- > Pyramidal orchids
- > Common century
- > Yellow Wort
- > Tree sparrow
- > Skylark
- > Yellow Hammer
- > Reed Bunting
- > 14 species of Dragonfly
- > Butterflies, including small skippers, and gatekeepers
- > Moths, including the five spotted Burnet and the four-spotted moth.

For more information on The Langdyke Countryside Trust or Swaddywell Pit Nature Reserve call Richard Astle on 01733 252376.

John Clare Trust Seeks Support

Dear Friend and Member,

As you probably know, the cottage in Helpston in which John Clare was born, lived and worked has recently come onto the market at a guide price of £475,000 (around \$890,000). This presents a unique opportunity to establish the cottage as a writing, educational and environmental centre with public access. There has been a great deal of enthusiastic support for such a proposal, and many inspiring plans for the potential uses of the cottage are taking shape.

The cottage could become a base for the support and development of writers and other artists in John Clare’s tradition. We might, for example, initiate short-term residential courses and creative retreats, or longer residencies of a month or more in which a writer might complete a project, work with schoolchildren or local groups, or follow Clare’s passion for chronicling the rural calendar.

The cottage could also provide a focus for the development of a wide-ranging educational programme. Over the years many of us have been inspired by adult courses on Clare, and indeed the John Clare Society was formed from the enthusiasm engendered by one such course. In recent years the Society has been working with a variety of partners in educational projects ranging from poetry competitions to public lectures to family activity days. The cottage could be at the heart of our continuing development and expansion of such inspirational projects.

We would also propose that the cottage be opened to the public on a regular basis – perhaps on the weekend of the John Clare Festival, and monthly throughout the year to allow enthusiasts and admirers of Clare to visit his former home in all seasons.

After a careful exploration of various possible approaches it was decided to establish a John Clare Trust to co-ordinate fundraising and – if successful –

to oversee the future use of the property. This new Trust has the enthusiastic support of the John Clare Society committee and its work on the cottage project will foster and complement the Society's activities. A Trust website will soon be active at www.johnclaretrust.org.

We are confident that the Trust can be successful in securing substantial grants from funds, trusts and foundations, but these will certainly need to be combined with generous support from a wide field of individuals. Thanks to significant early offers of assistance we believe that the property can be secured for twelve months or so while we conduct an intensive fundraising campaign. We would very much like your help in this, and would welcome both donations and no-interest loans, of any sum from \$10 to \$1,000,000.

Of course we will gladly discuss this appeal in more detail with any interested parties. Please don't hesitate to contact me with comments on any aspect of this proposal for the future use of the cottage, suggestions regarding fundraising or offers of assistance, financial or otherwise.

This is a unique opportunity to open up a permanent space in Helpston in celebration of Clare. I believe that we could attract very talented and diverse writers to residencies and courses at the cottage, and that it could become a magnificent educational resource for all ages, as well as a focus for Clare enthusiasts around the world. This project would generate exciting new events and activities for the John Clare Society, and a vital legacy for future generations of writers and readers. If you would like to help bring all this about, please lend whatever support you can.

Yours Faithfully,

Paul Chirico
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