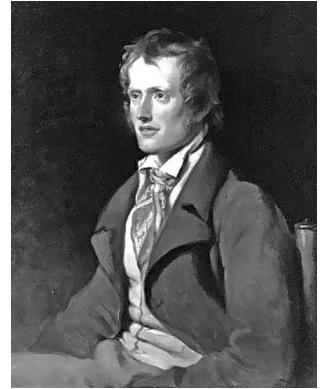


# The John Clare Society of North America *Newsletter*



Volume Nineteen, February 2018

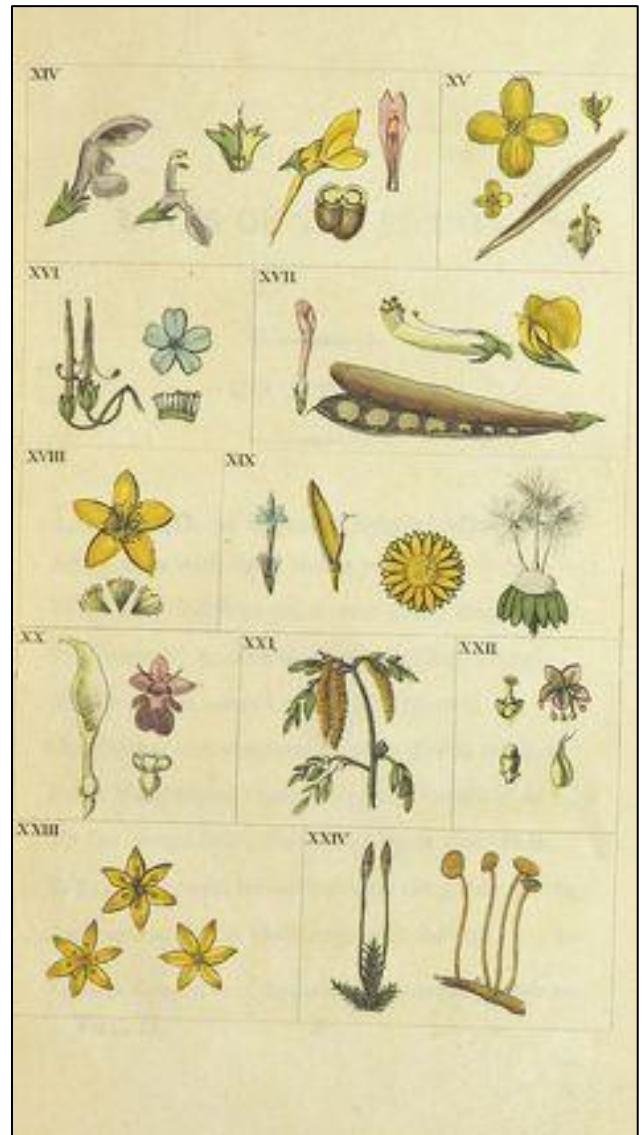
## From the Editor

This year's volume of the *Newsletter* contains three wonderful poems by American poet Barbara Wiedemann, a report on the panel at the MLA convention, three CFPs for upcoming conferences, a book review of Simon Kovesi's *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* (Palgrave, 2017), a list of recent academic writings, and several images from the works of Erasmus and Charles Darwin, as well as Clare himself.

In future volumes, I will continue the “musings” tradition, and I aim to help publicize and promote scholarly and creative work on Clare. So, please send me your musings, citations, references, essays, and notes, in whatever form and whatever point during the year. I can be reached at [sreno@aum.edu](mailto:sreno@aum.edu). I hope you enjoy the volume!



Seth T. Reno is Assistant Professor of English at Auburn University Montgomery. He is the author of *Amorous Aesthetics: Intellectual Love in Romantic Poetry and Poetics, 1788-1853* (Liverpool University Press, forthcoming in 2018), and co-editor of *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics: Affect and Ecology in the Nineteenth Century* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2016).



**Musings**  
**Three Poems**  
**by Barbara Wiedemann**

**“Written near Mammoth, California”**

The constant sound of the wind  
in the Ponderosa pines  
like the rushing of water through rapids,  
the cawing of the nearby raven,  
the coolness of the air  
that comes with seven thousand feet,  
the shimmering winter snows  
on the distant Sierra Nevada peaks,  
the blue green of the sage,  
the yellow green of the pine needles,  
and the russet of the tree trunks  
heighten my senses as I sit,  
coffee in one hand, a book in the other,  
my dog curled asleep nearby.  
All of this is what I have today.  
John Clare, Thoreau, Muir and so many others  
knew about such wealth  
and tried to teach us.

**“Day Two of a Five-Month Hike”**

Barrel cactus with chartreuse flowers and long  
pink spines teddy bear cactus also with  
chartreuse flowers,  
cholla with newly formed pale yellow thorns  
prickly pear with magenta flowers  
and octilla with long spikey stems adorned with  
red flowers signal spring in this southern  
California desert,  
a day’s walk from the border wall with Mexico.  
But all is not paradise  
in this mountainous aridity.  
Six feet long and thick like my forearm,  
the rattlesnake stretches across the trail  
disturbed it coils instantly  
then moves into the grasses,  
rattles when my dog and I walk by—  
I am a trespasser here.

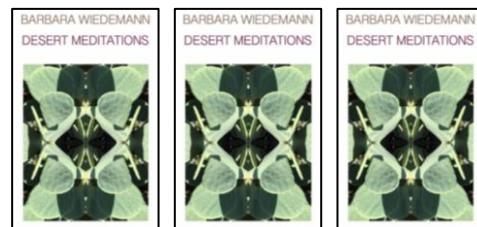
**“Pines and Cypress Trees”**

Cimitero Protestante,  
with its umbrella pines and cypress trees  
in the shadow of the pyramid of Cestius  
and bounded on one side by the Aurelian wall,  
is the home of a cat colony since the 1850s  
and was once the burial place for non-Catholics,  
placed as it was outside the walls of Rome.  
In the old section, spacious like a villa’s tended  
garden, rests John Keats,  
only identified as the “Young English Poet,”  
the inscription plain:  
“Here Lies One  
Whose Name was Writ in Water,”  
next to him the painter John Severn  
who cared for him  
those feverish last days in the apartment  
by the Spanish Steps.  
In the newer part, dense with nearly four thousand  
graves, lie Gramsci, Shelly, Goethe’s only son  
and the cat Romeo.  
Statues of mourning angels  
show the pain of the grievers  
but in the early years  
no Christian symbols of angels and crosses  
were allowed for the heathen Protestants.

So it is perhaps fitting that in the American South,  
the fortunes now reversed,  
it’s the Catholics who are the outsiders—  
one sometimes hears,  
“They’re not Christian, they’re Catholic.”



Barbara Wiedemann is an American poet and  
Professor Emeritus at Auburn University  
Montgomery. Her most recent chapbook is *Desert  
Meditations* (Finishing Line Press, 2018).



**Proceedings of the John Clare Panel at  
the 2018 MLA Convention**  
*by Seth T. Reno*

This year's session for the John Clare Society of North America at the MLA Convention in New York City was entitled "John Clare: The One and the Many." The session, chaired by Erica McAlpine (St Edmund Hall, University of Oxford), featured three early career scholars working on innovative approaches to Clare: MC Hyland (New York University), Timothy Heimlich (University of California, Berkeley), and Marissa Grunes (Harvard University). Audience members were delighted with all three papers, and we were especially excited about what the presentations signal for the future of Clare studies.

In "The Invitation?: Periodical Border-Wars and the Poetics of Encounter," Hyland discussed Clare's prominent position in the first Regency issue of the *London Magazine* (1820) and his curious use of semi-Scottish vernacular in "The Invitation." This poem is paired with a prose narrative, both of which recount the same event: Clare's meeting with John Taylor and Octavius Gilchrist. The conventional reading of this pairing is that the editors of the *London Magazine* modeled the role of Clare on that of James Hogg in their Scottish competitor, *Blackwood's Magazine*: a working-class rural writer connects the magazine's largely urban audience to their country's long-standing oral traditions. However, Hyland argues that Clare is doing something different. Clare performs his rusticity as *nationally* rather than *regionally*, which suggests a complex attempt at self-positioning within the periodical border-wars between Edinburgh and London. In fact, by modeling his poem in the Scottish tradition, which invokes both Hogg and Burns, Clare appears as a *multi-national* poet—a British Poet. Through this reading, Hyland adds to the growing body of scholarship that shows how Clare was not as isolated and regional a poet as he often seems in history and scholarship.

Heimlich also focused on Scottish influences in his paper, "Like a ruin of the past all alone?: Encountering History in John Clare's 'Remembrances.'" Heimlich argued that Clare's poem simulates a phenomenological encounter with the historical real. In a trope he adopts and adapts from poems like Walter Scott's *Marmion*, Clare examines material objects like a bush, an oak tree, and a field, and attempts to account for their present form through a narration of their history, a history he suggests is legible in their current appearance. This act of "place-reading" purports to restore hidden or otherwise-lost local histories to a body of general knowledge. Heimlich emphasizes that the places about which Clare writes have been enclosed—and so are no longer accessible—which means his published poetry virtually re-creates the places in question, preserving in print the objects and local histories that had been walled off by enclosure. This distinguishes Clare's place-reading from that of Scott. Clare's poetry is both the repository in which local histories are deposited and the lens through which they are encountered.

In the final paper, "Foliag'd houses?: Porous Architecture in John Clare, Edward Thomas, and Robert Frost," Grunes made the most surprising and provocative connection between Clare and the famous American poet named in her paper's title. Grunes argued for a kind of thematic influence-by-association: Frost remarked in 1921 that he enjoyed the poetry of Clare, and Frost's good friend Edward Thomas was a known admirer of Clare. Clare and Frost write of rural dwelling places in similar ways: cottages are resonating chambers amplifying the power of fire, rain, or snow; domiciles (often nests) are susceptible to rude invasions; phantoms of the past haunt the landscape; and home is threatened not only by the elements, but more permanently by the erosion of rural lifestyles and the encroachment of modernity. Triangulating these three poets, Grunes shows how Clare's poetry realizes encounters between the self and nature that would come to characterize nineteenth- and twentieth-century writing of American agrarianism and even of frontier life. Grunes's paper thus provided a fitting conclusion for a panel that opened up new avenues for encounters with Clare. I hope to see all three papers in print in the near future.

## Calls for Papers

**The John Clare Society of North America** invites proposals for its guaranteed session at the Modern Language Association Convention in Chicago, 3-6 January 2019. Title of session: "John Clare and Science." Scholarship on any aspect of John Clare's life and work as it relates to science. Papers might touch on topics such as botany, phrenology, ornithology, knowledge or knowing, etc. Please submit an abstract and short bio by email to Erica McAlpine by 9 March 2018 ([erica.mcalpine@ell.ox.ac.uk](mailto:erica.mcalpine@ell.ox.ac.uk)).

**The Wordsworth-Coleridge Association** also invited proposal for its guaranteed session at the MLA Convention. Despite its name, the Association is open to anything in the domain of Romanticism, and this year's theme, "Romantic Elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water," may prove of interest for environmental approaches to Clare. Proposals for papers should examine the classical, archetypal, geographic, and scientific meanings of the elements in British and European Romantic literature and visual art. Topics may include close readings of particular Romantic poems that invoke or deploy one or more of the four elements, as well as broader surveys that follow a particular classical element on its journey through Romantic literature, art, science and popular culture. Submit abstracts of 300 words and a short bio to James McKusick ([mckusickj@umkc.edu](mailto:mckusickj@umkc.edu)) by 15 March 2018.

**Note:** All MLA program participants must be members of the Modern Language Association by 1 April 2018. For further information on the convention, go to [www.mla.org/convention](http://www.mla.org/convention).

**The Nineteenth Century Studies Association** will hold its annual conference in Kansas City, 7-9 March 2019. The conference committee, directed by our very own James McKusick, invites proposals that examine the conference theme of "Explorations" in the history, literature, art, music, and popular culture of the nineteenth century. Interdisciplinary approaches to this theme are welcome from North American,

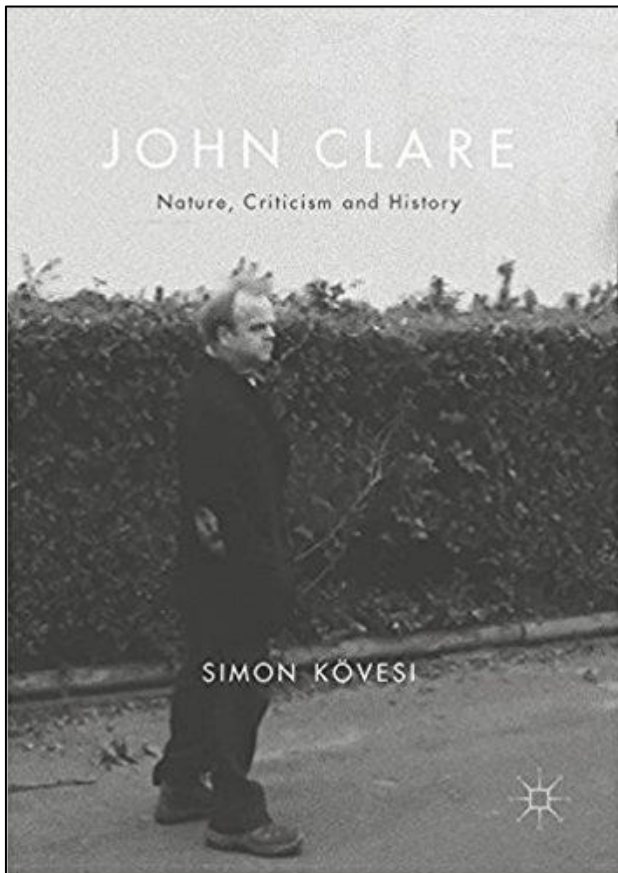
British, European, Asian, African and worldwide perspectives. From the early nineteenth century, when Lewis and Clark paddled through the Kansas City area on their way up the Missouri River to explore the North American continent, through the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, the building of factories and railroads, the mechanization of agriculture, and the advent of mass-produced cultural artifacts, the American Midwest became a crossroads for explorers and inventors, hucksters and entrepreneurs, artists and musicians, poets and dreamers who pursued their discoveries toward destinations made possible by the wide-open spaces of the Great Plains. In this way, the Kansas City region is emblematic of a larger set of trends in the global evolution of culture during the nineteenth century that radically altered the fundamental conditions of human existence. How does the discovery of new geographical knowledge change the perception of human possibility? How do innovations in science and technology affect the development of literature, music and art? How does the recovery of previously unheard voices—of women, of workers, of Native Americans and people of color—influence the understanding of social history in America and the wider world? Topics for investigation include encounters between Western explorers and indigenous people; the impact of steamships and railways upon changing perceptions of time and space; resistance and accommodation between traditional folkways and mass-produced culture; and the development of new idioms in literature, art, and music to express the broader horizons of nineteenth-century self-awareness.

Proposals for individual papers are due by 30 September 2018. Please send 300-word abstracts (as an email attachment in MS Word format) along with a one-page CV to [nlsa2019@gmail.com](mailto:nlsa2019@gmail.com).

Proposals for roundtable panels are also due by 30 September 2018. Roundtables should be pre-organized by a group of 4-8 presenters. To propose a roundtable topic, please send a single 300-word abstract describing the general topic of the roundtable. Your abstract should include the proposed session title and the full name of each presenter, with their email and phone contacts, job title, and affiliation. Indicate which presenter has agreed to serve as discussion moderator.

**Book Review**  
*by Erin Lafford*

***John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History*, by Simon Kövesi (Palgrave, 2017), 266 pp., \$99.99 (hardcover), \$79.99 (e-book)**



The cover image of Simon Kövesi's *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* already announces the author's intention to disrupt our critical preconceptions surrounding this poet. The monochrome, grainy shot of Clare (as played by Toby Jones in the 2016 film *By Ourselves*, directed by Andrew Kötting) wandering the road beside a hedgerow is vastly different to the pastoral images of landscape frequently chosen to cover previous studies. It is an arresting visual, and one that captures the critical spirit of Kövesi's work. As he states in the introduction: "A singular 'placing' of Clare often works against a critical emphasis on variation and experimentation, just as the

naturalisation of him into a 'denizen of nature' might deny him an intellectual volition or a social situation" (9-10). The Clare we see on the cover is indeed hard to 'place', and the key argument threaded throughout Kövesi's book is that the current impulse to foreground the poet as a model of proto-environmental consciousness needs to be requalified in relation to the various other concerns and positions that inform his writing, such as class, gender, editorial practices, and the "problem of history" (10). For Kövesi, Clare is not a poet who was uncomplicatedly rooted "in place" and therefore wrote unfailingly from a local, ecological perspective. He claims that "sometimes, critics 'deploy' Clare as a sort of proto-ecological weapon in a manner which *displaces* him both in terms of space and in terms of history" (13). As such, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* is a timely and important contribution not only to the continuing critical debate surrounding Clare as a poet of supposedly remarkable ecological consciousness, but to the study of his works as a whole and of the critical practices and approaches that he has heretofore provoked. Kövesi's statement that "this book is as much about critical and theoretical practice as it is about Clare" (10) might throw the reader in search of the kind of streamlined, focussed thesis that can drive a single-author study. But, as each chapter unfolds, Kövesi offers more and more insightful, scholarly, and potentially revisionary arguments about the breadth of Clare's works and some of the more deeply-set critical narratives surrounding him and his representation of the natural world.

Chapter one, also serving as the introduction, sees Kövesi trace deftly the use of the phrase "down to earth" in Clare's reception history, in order to assert that this phrase, and the assumptions of uncomplicated locality that go with it, gloss over the poet's own fraught relationship with his local surroundings that is a result of his labouring-class position. Kövesi's observation that Clare was as much a participant in the enclosing acts through his dependence on local labouring jobs as he was enclosure's fierce decier is enlightening.

In chapter two, the Romantic interest in "egoism" and "egotism" are explored productively in relation to Clare, who emerges under Kövesi's attention as a

poet who conceives a “rhizomatic” model of engagement with the natural world that denies fixed subject positions. It is in this chapter particularly that Kövesi’s attention to Clare’s manuscripts, a sure strength of the book as a whole, comes to the fore; his reading of the sonnet “The shepherds almost wonder where they dwell” is a fine and detailed exposition of how the manuscript context of this poem, where Clare’s handwritten presentation splices its lines into one vertical and one horizontal block of text, makes us alert to it as an open-ended, perhaps ecologically-minded “drafting process, not a completely finished text” (105).

This “unfinished, provisional nature” of Clare’s poems is discussed further in chapter three. Here, Kövesi discusses editorial decisions surrounding the poet’s works that beg the question of whether “a reading of his green politics can help inform new modes of presenting his texts, more in line with how we find them and how we might want to see them” (127-8). This chapter feels particularly important for how it highlights how much work there is left to do to produce an edition of Clare’s poetry and prose (which for Kövesi should contain both manuscript versions and the lifetime-published texts together) that remains sensitive to his own more “green” avoidance of “egocentric” textual practice.

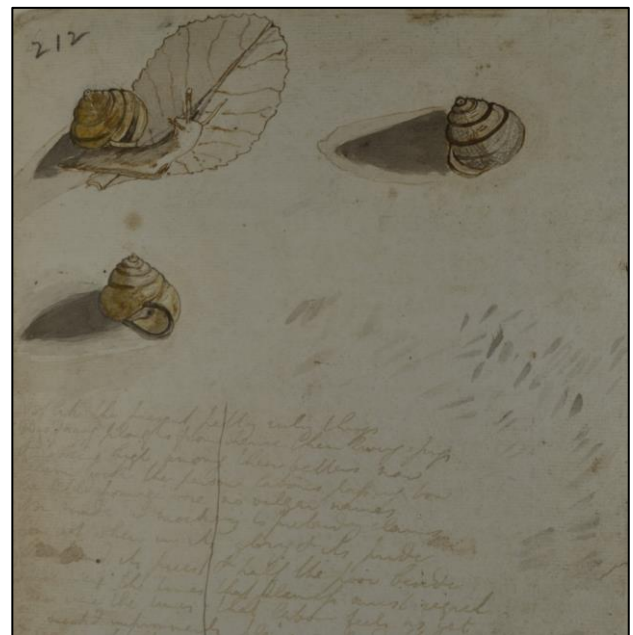
Chapter four then shifts to a discussion of how Clare as a “love poet,” and particularly his representations of women, has been “relegated” by a focus on his “nature poetry” (163). This chapter is the most engaging during its consideration of how much of Clare’s love poetry arrives at the similar “ecocentric levelling and mutualising relationships of Clare’s best and most original nature poetry” (166).

The final chapter concludes by turning to the poet’s presence in contemporary literary culture, in order to ask if we can pursue “such ‘contemporary Clares’ while still practising serious literary criticism?” (217). Here, Kövesi draws on the writings of Hans-Georg Gadamer and his term the “fusion of horizons” to bring the nature of historicist criticism under question, ending with

the suggestion that “criticism would be more aware of its own historical contingency if it paid closer attention to rewritings of the literary past in contemporary imaginative work” (233). This chapter, and the book as a whole, does the valuable work of emphasizing the importance of attending to Clare as a poet who cannot, and should not, be pinned down by critical frameworks (even those that would claim him for admirably environmentalist agendas) that do a disservice to the complex multiplicity of his thought. Overall, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* is a fresh and exciting contribution to Clare studies underpinned by an impressive depth of scholarship and immersion in archival resources. It is a necessary read for those who continue to work on Clare.



Erin Lafford is Stipendiary Lecturer in English at St. Peter’s College, Oxford. She completed her PhD at Oxford on “Forms of Health in John Clare’s Poetics.” Her articles appear in the *John Clare Society Journal*, *Literature and Theology*, *Romanticism*, and *Literature Compass*.



## Recent Academic Writings

Adams, Theresa. "John Clare and the Problem of Audience." *European Romantic Review*, vol. 28, no. 5, 2017, pp. 625-642.

Bewell, Alan. *Natures in Translation: Romanticism and Colonial Natural History*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017.

Castellano, Katey. "Moles, Molehills, and Common Right in John Clare's Poetry." *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 56, no. 2, 2017, pp. 157-176.

Cox, Peter. "'From the world away': Clare and the Hermit's Life." *John Clare Society Journal*, vol. 26, 2017, pp. 17-30.

Falk, Michael. "The Nightjar's Shriek: Nature's Variety in the Sonnets of John Clare and Charlotte Smith." *John Clare Society Journal*, vol. 26, 2017, pp. 31-48.

Gallas, John. *Mad John's Walk: With John Clare from High Beach Asylum to Northborough*. Five Leaves, 2017.

Gargallo, Florian. "John Clare and the Early Poems of Seamus Heaney." *Essays in Criticism*, vol. 67, no. 2, 2017, pp. 175-194.

Goodridge, John, and Bridget Keegan. *A History of British Working Class Literature*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Heyes, Robert. "A Keats-Clare Connection Refuted." *John Clare Society Journal*, vol. 26, 2017, pp. 49-56.

Hodgson, Andrew, and Erin Lafford. "An Index of Significant Publications on John Clare, 2011-2016." *John Clare Society Journal*, vol. 26, 2017, pp. 69-76.

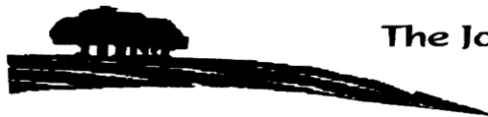
Kovesi, Simon. *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History*. Palgrave, 2017.

Stafford, Fiona. "Clare and the Splendid Sycamore." *John Clare Society Journal*, vol. 26, 2017, pp. 7-16.

Weiner, Stephanie Kuduk. "Exemplary Figures in Clare's Descriptive Poems." *John Clare Society Journal*, vol. 26, 2017, pp. 57-68.

White, Adam. *John Clare's Romanticism*. Palgrave, 2017.

Whitehead, James. *Madness and the Romantic Poet: A Critical History*. Oxford University Press, 2017.



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