

The John Clare Society of North America

Newsletter

Volume Twenty, February 2019



From the Editor

This year's volume of the *Newsletter* contains four fantastic poems by Barbara Wiedemann, a report on the panel at the MLA convention, a CFP for next year's MLA Convention, and a list of recent academic writings.

In order to publicize and promote scholarly and creative work on Clare, please send me your musings, citations, references, essays, and notes, in whatever form for inclusion in next year's volume. I can be reached at sreno@aum.edu. I hope you enjoy the volume!



Seth T. Reno is Associate 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, 2019), editor of *Romanticism and Affect Studies* (Romantic Circles Praxis Series, 2018), and co-editor of *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics: Affect and Ecology in the Nineteenth Century* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2016).

Musings

Four Poems
by Barbara Wiedemann

The Other Side of the Glass

This February day
is a blustery one for Alabama
with the wind and forty-degree temperature
and heavy grey clouds.
But the robins on their winter sojourn
notice not as they scan the lawn
and scatter the mulch
looking for worms and bugs
surfaced by last night's rain.
Startled by the slamming of a car door
they seek safety
in the leafless tulip poplar
but soon descend to the ground,
their terra cotta breasts
a contrast to the winter brown of the grass.
Nor are the robins alone—
there are two yellow finches,
a blue jay, a woodpecker
and several mourning doves
eating the seeds of the popcorn tree
and one squirrel searching for pecans.

So perhaps
it is my indoor world
that is the gray one.

The Beauty of Indirection

On this sparkling day in January
a few snow flakes
float randomly through the air
milling around, ascending more than descending.
They can't seem to decide on their direction
or even their destination.
Gravity has no hold on them.

But they are beautiful in their freshness
much like the youth I know.

Darwin Lives

The caterpillar had chosen the brown of a cactus
and spun a brown chrysalis,
his siblings chose green
and spun green and emerged a few weeks later.
So it was determined in September
that he would winter.
He survived the heavy rains
the twenty-degree temperatures
and waited all those fall and winter months
to emerge on March second.
He chose well that spring day,
seventy-five degrees and sunny,
the warmest day yet.
Violas were blooming
a few Dianthus, some narcissus,
miniature daffodils and the Japanese magnolia.
He spread his wings
allowing them to stiffen,
preparing for his next journey
as a black swallowtail butterfly.

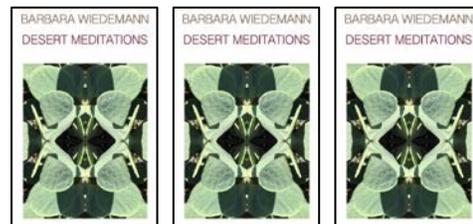
Sixth Extinction

Picture this—
Mount St. Helens looms in the distance
and in the foreground Mt Hood.
Both are silent now but almost forty years ago
Mount St. Helens was over one thousand feet taller
and then abruptly its peak was sliced off.
Forty years and life is returning to the ashy slopes.
First there came the lupines and the fast-growing
red alder
though Douglas fir and western hemlock have yet
to show.
Red-winged black birds and hawks are back
but very few amphibians.
The mountain's time is not ours.

We've all seen the pictures
the ashy plumes and the blasted trees
a disaster, the largest eruption in the lower forty
eight,
nine hours of terror
though small compared to human-caused
destruction
and life will come again back.
Only we won't witness it.



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 2019 MLA Convention**
by James C. McKusick

This year's session for the John Clare Society of North America at the MLA Convention in Chicago was entitled "John Clare and Science." The session was organized by Erica McAlpine (St. Edmund Hall, University of Oxford) and chaired by Nancy M. Derbyshire (Borough of Manhattan Community College, City University of New York). The session featured three scholars working on interdisciplinary approaches to Clare: Eliza Holmes (Harvard University), Richard Ness (University of Wisconsin, Madison) and Christy Edwall (New College, University of Oxford). Audience members were fascinated by all three papers, and lively discussion ensued.

In "John Clare's Local Botany," Holmes argued that John Clare was well-versed in the botanical and ornithological language and science of his day. Indeed, he owned botany books and corresponded with botanists and enthusiasts about kinds of ferns and orchids and birds. He collected samples of nests and eggs and plants, and his observations are detailed and scientific. Yet Clare rarely used the language of science in his poetry, instead depending on local names and local descriptions of the plants and birds that peopled his childhood. Holmes argued that Clare's local botany is used in direct opposition to the definitions and descriptions of nineteenth-century natural science. Clare's poetry echoes his dependence on marginal spaces: he encounters the world not as a human bending down to look at a specimen, but instead as an insect, or a bird, living on the edge of the human world, in danger of being wiped out as field after field was enclosed. His loyalty to local names is a loyalty to an immersive, mutually vulnerable language that takes its shape from the sound and form of the plants described. Science, and scientific language, is associated with the acts of enclosure, with the harsh lines and walls of the newly inaccessible fields of his childhood. Holmes concluded that

Clare's use of local language is an act of intimate connection: not to people, but to an ecosystem on the verge of collapse.

In "Towards a Scientific Aesthetic: John Clare's 'Man of Science and of Taste,'" Ness observed that nature was widely regarded by nineteenth-century scientists and artists as a wild and savage terrain that needed to be tamed and perfected through human intervention. Ness examined how John Clare pushes back on this intellectual trend, which offers an impoverished science that subdues and decontextualizes nature. Moreover, the ideologies invisibly embedded in science simultaneously shape the rule-bound art whose "strong impulse mars the truth of taste," as Clare notes in his poem, "Shadows of Taste." Through poems, essays, letters, and autobiographical sketches that address taste, Clare shows us how science and aesthetics get articulated through each other as the cultivation, order, and constraint sought by science were also the markers of aesthetic beauty. In contrast to the scientific theories and aesthetic regimes that valued order, form, and rules, Clare offers a scientific aesthetic decidedly opposed to these values, one that valorizes disorder, excess, and contingency and is more attuned to nature's infinite particularities, its messy profusions, and its random accidents. In this way, Clare articulates a scientific taste that is more closely aligned with how we actually experience the particular living forms that move through our environmental surround.

The final paper, "'Bits of lichen and a sprig of moss': Clare's Linnaean Encounters," explored Clare's fascination with the scientific practice of botany. For example, on 25 March 1825, Clare recorded taking "a walk to day to botanize" in his journal. Less than a month later, he "took a walk in the field a birds nesting & botanizing." Later that year, Clare caught a cold after he went "a Botanizing after Ferns & Orchises." Despite Clare's apparent distrust of Linnaeus's "dark system," the poet comfortably employs the language of systematic botany, of "specimen" and "species," "kind" and "sort," as he records discoveries, collections, and rarities. Edwall sought to prise open Clare's apparent distaste for Linnaean botany—a distaste that seems to confirm his poetic reputation as an institutional outlier—from his adjectival sympathies with Linnaean texts

and his botanical reading. Clare frequently engaged in the “hunting” of specimens, and he often exchanged these specimens with Joseph Henderson, the head gardener at Milton. Edwall’s paper presented Clare as aspiring to become “the man of science and of taste” who acts as a pivot between scientific curiosity and poetic reputation.



James McKusick is Executive Director of the John Clare Society of North America and President of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association. He is the author of *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (St. Martin’s Press, 2000). He is Professor of English and Dean of the Honors College at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Call for Papers

The John Clare Society of North America invites proposals for its guaranteed session at the Modern Language Association Convention in Seattle, 9-12 January 2020. Title of session: “John Clare: Conversations in Song.” Scholarship on any aspect of song, music, or conversation in Clare. Papers might touch on personification, voice and its relation to print, and/or Clare’s way of relating to the non-human world. Please submit an abstract and short bio by 10 March 2019 to Erica McAlpine (erica.mcalpine@ell.ox.ac.uk).

Recent Academic Writings

Ahmadi, Moslem. “John Keats and John Clare: The Ivory Tower Poets of Romanticism.” *Advances in Language and Literary Studies* 9, no. 1 (2018): 67-69.

Branson, Mary. “A Conversation with My Mother?: The Sound.” *John Clare Society Journal* 37 (2018): 23-26.

Derbyshire, Nancy. “John Clare and the License of Listening.” *John Clare Society Journal* 37 (2018): 41-62.

Diakantoniou, Maria Theodra. “The Notes of a Peasant’s Life: Rootedness, Emotion, and Identity in John Clare’s Bird Poetry.” *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, 2018.

Gallas, John. “Against the Biography of John Clare.” *John Clare Society Journal* 27 (2018): 63-64.

Heyes, Robert. “John Clare’s Library.” *John Clare Society Journal* 37 (2018): 79-87.

Hodgson, Andrew, and Erin Lafford. “An Index of Significant Publications on John Clare, 2016-2017.” *John Clare Society Journal* 37 (2018): 88-89.

Houghton-Walker, Sarah. “Life Stories: The Coroner’s Report on the Death of Mary Joyce.” *John Clare Society Journal* 37 (2018): 65-78.

Poetzsch, Markus. “John Clare’s Particular Particularity and the Language of Climate.” *John Clare Society Journal* 37 (2018): 27-40.

Vincent, Patrick. “Common Sense and Ale?: Cobbett, Clare, and the 1830 Beer Act.” *John Clare Society Journal* 37 (2018): 5-22.



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