



The John Clare Society of North America

NEWSLETTER

Volume 1, Number 1, August 1998

The editor invites brief submissions of items relevant to Clare studies, including calls for papers, announcements of new books or articles, details of up-coming events, and scholarly notes. Send submissions to Sarah M. Zimmerman, Dept. of English, Fordham University, Lincoln Center Campus, 113 W. 60th St., New York, NY 10023; or to: smzimmer@facstaff.wisc.edu

Organization of the John Clare Society of North America (JCSNA)

James McKusick, Executive Director of the JCSNA, has announced the organization of a non-profit literary society based at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County. Eric Robinson is the group's President, and Bridget Keegan is Vice President. According to a January 1998 press release, the JCSNA's purposes include promoting the study of Clare's works and life; promoting the collection, preservation, and exchange of items of literary and biographical interest; promoting a wider appreciation of Clare and the continuing publication of his works; advocating the protection of Clare's countryside and encouraging rural education and sensitivity to rural landscapes. The JCSNA is a branch of the John Clare Society (JCS) based in Helpston, England. North American members receive all benefits and publications of both societies, including the U.K. quarterly newsletter and annual journal. They are invited to attend events held in England and informed about new publications and recordings. The JCSNA is developing lectures, programs, and seminars to be offered at different North American locations. To join, contact McKusick, Dept. of English, University of Maryland Baltimore County, Baltimore, MD 21250; (410) 455-2164; McKusick@umbc.edu

Formation of the JCSNA Advisory Board

The JCSNA Executive Committee has announced the organization of an Advisory Board whose members, according to the organization's By-Laws, "shall be scholars, writers or persons of distinguished reputation who agree to serve in an advisory capacity to the Society." The new Board members are:

—Anne Barton,
Grace II Professor of English, Trinity College, Cambridge University
—Galway Kinnell,
Erich Maria Remarque Professor of Creative Writing, New York University
—Mark L. Reed,
Professor of English, University of North Carolina
—David E. Simpson,
Professor of English, University of California, Davis

Clare On the Net

The John Clare Page features poems by Clare, news of up-coming conferences and the program of the recent Day Conference (see below), a home page for the JCS, a "Chronology of Clare's Life" by John Goodridge, a Bibliography by Simon Kövesi, a list of related websites, and links to scholarly articles on Clare. Its location is:
<http://human.ntu.ac.uk/foh/ems/clare.html>

Up-Coming Events

1998 Modern Language Association Panel on Clare

For the sixth consecutive year, the 1998 MLA convention in San Francisco will include a special session devoted to Clare's work. This year's panel, entitled "Reading John Clare," will feature papers by Bridget Keegan of Creighton University, Robert Maniquis of the University of California, Los Angeles, and Simon Kövesi of the Nottingham Trent University. Organized by Scott McEathron of Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, the panel will be focused on new readings of Clare's poetry, and the readings proposed in all three papers emerge, at least in part, from re-examinations of biographical perspectives on Clare which seem to have become axiomatic or overly prescriptive. Tentative titles and topics are as follows. Keegan's paper, "Boys, Marvelous Boys: John Clare, Youth, and Genius," places Clare in a line with Chatterton, Bloomfield, and Keats, and explores Clare's own sense of his poetic lineage in relation to prevailing notions of 'natural

genius.' Maniquis's paper, "John Clare and the Culture of the Poor," seeks to recast our understanding of the dual social positions that circumscribed Clare's career: 1) his literary-class position as a 'peasant poet' with a predominantly middle-class readership, and 2) his socio-economic class position as a rural laborer. Kövesi's paper, "'O poesie thy unexhausted powers': the Aesthetic Liberation of Clare's Later Poetry," offers an important reappraisal of Clare's later work and its relationship to his confinement at Northampton Asylum. The panel is scheduled for 3:30-4:45 pm, Monday, December 28, 1998.

Scott McEathron

Eric Robinson's Lecture Tour: Clare and His World

Eric Robinson, international Clare scholar and an editor of the Clarendon Press edition of Clare's poems and of numerous paperback editions of the poems and prose, plans a lecture tour of the United States and Canada, aimed to introduce new readers to Clare's poems, prose and life. The tour is part of the educational outreach efforts of the JCSNA. Robinson will speak at a range of forums, including colleges and universities, libraries and book clubs, bookstores, adult education and advanced high school classes, literary societies, and nature organizations. The tour is in its planning stages. For information about organizing or attending a lecture, contact Pamela Blevins, Public Relations Director, 5333 N. 26th St., Arlington, VA 22207; (703) 532-2055; kshaffer@erols.com

Recent Events

Publication of Volumes 7 and 8 of Clare's *Poems*

Clare's *Poems of the Middle Period*, Parts 3 and 4, recently appeared from Oxford University's Clarendon Press (1998). The volumes are edited by Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P.M.S. Dawson. Begun in 1963, the Clarendon Press edition, when complete, will contain more than 2,000 of Clare's poems. The 9th and final volume is scheduled to appear in Summer 1999.

Day Conference: John Clare, New Approaches and New Voices, 18 July 1998

The Conference was sponsored by the Nottingham Trent University and the JCS. Participants were welcomed at 10am by conference organizers, John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi, both of the Nottingham Trent University. Goodridge introduced the day's first Keynote Speaker, Jonathan Bate (University of Liverpool), who began his presentation with the exciting news that he had been commissioned to write a new biography of Clare which is scheduled for publication by Picador in the year 2001. Bate talk then reviewed the various Clare biographies and convincingly argued for the need for a new biography for a new millennium, in large part due to the greater availability and accessibility of the full corpus of Clare's writings.

Subsequent to Bate's well received lecture, conference-goers had their choice between parallel

sessions. Panel topics included "Archetypes and Influences," "Romanticism and Gender," "Romantic and Philosophical Approaches," "Politics and Sociability," "Writing and Editing" and "Popular and Pastoral Influences." Although speakers included some very well-known scholars and editors including Eric Robinson, David Powell, John Lucas and James McKusick, the emphasis of the conference was on younger scholars and other 'new voices' (i.e., scholars who have just begun to devote their studies to Clare).

The day ended with two additional plenary addresses, a short talk by Richard Fitter on "Identity problems in John Clare's *Birds and Wild Flowers*" (which dealt with some mysterious and as yet unidentified flora and fauna that appear in the writing) and a longer paper by Tom Paulin (Oxford University), entitled "Some Thoughts on a Great English Nature Poet: Clare's 'Birds Nesting'." After an intensive and rewarding day of sharing ideas and research, participants retired to the nearby pub, The Lincolnshire Poacher for a well-deserved pint and a delicious buffet dinner organized by Kövesi.

Bridget Keegan

Annual John Clare Festival, 11 July 1998

The Festival is now in its seventeenth year and held on the weekend closest to the poet's July 13th birthday. As in previous years, it was headquartered at the John Clare School. Visitors could enjoy a number of stalls and exhibits, including most notably a beautiful display of new photographs by Peter Moyse, entitled "John Clare

and the Seasons." At 10:30, the Annual General Meeting got underway and began with a moment of silence in honor of Mary Moyse. The president's report to the Society then began with a moving expression of gratitude for her years of service, and sympathy for her family and husband Peter Moyse, hon. treasurer of the Society. The death of George Clare, great grandson to the poet, on June 10, 1998 was also noted. The treasurer's report followed, and began with news of a net increase in membership in the JCS overall (including the members of JCSNA) of 30 percent, with 623 members, as of May 31st. Thanks to various grants and donations, the Society as a whole remains fiscally healthy. After the membership secretary's report, the society held elections. Peter Moyse was appointed hon. secretary; Linda Curry, hon. treasurer; Roger Breeze (a descendent of the poet), membership secretary. Several new members were also elected to the General Committee: Kövesi, Ann Marshall, Paul Chirico, and Mike Meacham.

Although the day was overcast and a bit chilly (even for England!), after the meeting, Noel Staples and Keith Traynar led well-attended guided walks of Clare's native village. Highlights included a visit to Clare's gravesite, which was surrounded by beautiful midsummer cushion floral arrangements made by local school-children, a stop at Clare's cottage, the garden of which was open to the public for the day, and a look into Clare's favorite pub, The Blue Bell Inn, which is now offering patrons a special John Clare Ale. During lunch, diners at the Blue Bell and other pubs in the village were treated to traditional

English folk dancing. Ronald Blythe gave an eloquent Presidential Address (soon available on the John Clare Page) devoted to Clare's "hiddenness" and the importance of the hidden in Clare's poetry. It was followed by a fascinating lecture by Anne Barton (Cambridge University) on the subject of "John Clare's Animals: The Wild and the Tame." An exhaustive overview of the two and four legged creatures who populate Clare's poetry, Barton's talk reminded us that in the world of Clare's writing, the lives of animals and humans are very closely bound up together. Clare's sources for his depiction of birds and beasts are as much personal as literary, revealing experiences from Clare's own life as well as allusions to other poets whom Clare knew and loved, such as Marvell and Shakespeare.

The day concluded with poetry reading in St. Botolph's Church, with those present reading (and even singing) favorite selections followed by folk music at the Blue Bell. Next year's festival will be held on July 10, 1999. Because Helpston is very close to London (it is an easy one hour train trip to Northampton and then a short drive to Helpston), any JCSNA members who find themselves in London next summer would be well-rewarded to attend. The countryside around Helpston is as beautiful as that in the Cotswolds and certainly less corrupted by tourism. Moreover, seeing the landscape that inspired and serves as the substance of most of Clare's poetry can give the reader a more profound understanding of its beauty and complexity.

Bridget Keegan