



The John Clare Society of North America

Newsletter

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The editor invites the submission of announcements relative to Clare studies, including recent and forthcoming publications and events, calls for papers and essays, descriptions of significant library holdings of his works, and scholarly notes. Sarah M. Zimmerman, Fordham University, 113 W. 60th St., New York, NY 10023.
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JOHN CLARE SOCIETY GAINS MLA STATUS

We are very pleased to report that the Modern Language Association approved the application of the John Clare Society of North America (JCSNA) for affiliate organization status. This new, permanent status will entitle the Society to organize one session per year at the MLA Convention, starting in December 2000.

As an MLA affiliate organization, the JCSNA joins the eminent ranks of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association, the Keats-Shelley Association, the Byron Society, and many other distinguished literary organizations. Very few applicants have been approved for MLA affiliate status in recent years, so the approval of the JCSNA accords a distinctive mark of national recognition to the quality of the special sessions that we have organized over the last seven years, and to the vital importance of John Clare's poetry and prose to the study of British Romanticism. Special thanks are due to Bridget Keegan, Scott McEathron, and Sarah Zimmerman, whose incisive and well-organized MLA special sessions on John Clare have established the Society's reputation as a

distinguished professional organization. Sincere thanks are also due to the JCSNA Advisory Board Members—Anne Barton, Galway Kinnell, Mark Reed, and David Simpson—whose timely advocacy of our quest for affiliate status proved essential to its approval by the MLA.

Future MLA sessions on John Clare will continue to be organized by Scott McEathron, Program Chair, whose latest call for papers appears elsewhere in this newsletter.

—James McKusick

1999 MLA Panel on Clare in Chicago

On December 30, 1999, the JCSNA sponsored a special session at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association in Chicago. Chaired by Bridget Keegan of Creighton University, the panel, "John Clare and Working-Class Literary Culture," featured papers by David Worrall of St. Mary's University College, Alan Vardy of Simon Fraser University, and Simon White of the University of York. Since one of the aims of the JCSNA is to encourage the study of Clare's contemporary working-class writers, this year's panel turned its attention to new projects that extend our sense of the vibrancy and social

significance of laboring-class literature in Clare's era. David Worrall's paper "'Obnoxious performance': The Plebeian Culture of Theater, Street, and Stage in Romantic Period Melodrama," examined radical expression in the so-called 'Minor' (or 'non-Patent') London theaters in the years 1795-1832. Focussing on the integrated culture of theaters, pubs, and presses in the square mile around Covent Garden and Drury Lane, Worrall argued for what he called "a plebeian articulacy between street and stage," an idea he developed through close examination of the playwright William Thomas Moncreiff. Drawing on a variety of unpublished sources (including Moncreiff's manuscripts, legal documents, spy and informer reports, and the censorship reports of the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays), Worrall demonstrated the importance of the 'Minor' theaters as actual and proxy "sites of radical occupation."

Alan Vardy's "Patronage and Political Crisis: Clare and Mrs. Marsh" offered a new analysis of the terms of conservative literary patronage in the period by focussing on the response of one of Clare's patrons, Marianne Marsh, to the notorious Swing Riots of 1830 and 1831. Vardy examined Mrs. Marsh's motives in sending Clare copies of William Cobbett's *Two-Penny Trash*, a series of pamphlets articulating a political position in direct opposition to that of her husband, Herbert Marsh, the Bishop of Peterborough. In discussing several issues which became part of the political atmosphere surrounding the Swing Riots, including "the radical demand to abolish Church tithes" and Cobbett's trial for sedition in 1831, Vardy illuminated the complex response to the Riots in rural areas, and argued that the

discussion of these issues in the correspondence between Clare and Marianne Marsh reveals an exchange of ideas "surprisingly outside the bounds of narrow class interests."

Simon White's paper, "The Voice of Robert Bloomfield's Ballads," sought to move beyond the critical tendency to view Bloomfield as the author of only a single poem, "The Farmer's Boy," by arguing for the importance of his later ballads. White read this body of work through the late eighteenth-century English and Scottish vogue for collecting and printing popular ballads. Examining the graphic and scholarly apparatus employed in many such ballad collections (including prefaces, headnotes, and illustrations), White turned to a discussion of the disputes between Bloomfield, his patron Capel Lofft, and his publisher regarding the proposed presentation of his *Rural Tales, Ballads, and Songs* (1802) and described ways in which certain decisions about the printing of Bloomfield's verse "could be said deliberately to place Bloomfield's volume within a project of literary archaeology."

Next year's panel, tentatively titled "Expanding the Clare Canon," will be the first to be held under the JCSNA's new status as an Affiliate Organization of the MLA. The panel is seeking papers which offer detailed readings of, and contexts for, Clare's poetry & prose, especially papers that focus on lesser-known and/or neglected works. Those interested in presenting papers should contact Scott McEathron, Dept. of English, S. Illinois University, Carbondale, IL 62901-4503, or mceath@aol.com, before March 1.

—Scott McEathron

Letters to the Editor

To the Editor:

I was introduced to John Clare's poetry in 1981 via a correspondence with Ronald Blythe. I did a series of poems on Blythe's "Akenfield" in 1981 and mailed them to him by way of his publisher. We continue to have a correspondence to this day. At that time I was farming, milking cows. Before cows I drove a truck.

Poetry has been a large part of my adult life. I retired from dairy farming 10 years ago but continue to make and sell hay. During the winter months I hop about the local schools volunteering in the elementary grades, introducing kids to poetry. When I am given the chance to read my poems in public I always insert at least one of Clare's poems.

In the Society's Newsletter, "the editor invites brief submissions of items relevant to Clare studies." I do not have books or scholarly notes but thought you might like to know that Clare is being heard, and is a poet not to be overlooked. After reading "The Moors" at the small Liberal Arts College in Unity, Maine, the Assistant to the President, Heidi Brugger, came up to me and said, "I never heard of John Clare but your reading has certainly sparked an interest. I'm going to look him up." I have discovered that Clare is not in the top ten of academia's suggested reading list of poets. In the public school system the English poetry export for most teachers is Alfred, Lord Tennyson, and for some, John Lennon—John Clare draws a total blank.

I'm not sure if I mentioned that I am called on from time to time to prepare promotional material for a local Watershed Association. Whenever I create meeting programs, etc. I always use a quote from Clare's work. It fits so well the environmental message I'm trying to send. One of my favorites is from "Sudden Shower": "Let's look about and find a sheltering place / The little things around like you and I / Are hurrying through the grass to shun the shower / Here stoops an ash tree . . ."

Best regards,
George V. Van Deventer, Maine

New and Forthcoming Publications

Dean of Social Sciences at the University of Durham, Joy A. Palmer, recently and graciously allowed JSNCA member John Coletta to persuade her to include Clare as one of the Fifty Key Environmental Thinkers in history in a forthcoming book of that name that she is co-editing (to be published by Routledge). Clare was not originally among the fifty, but Coletta, who is to contribute entries on a couple of literary figures, was able to get Clare included, though a major literary figure had to be bumped in the process. For fear of retaliation from devotees of that (19th-century American male) author, Coletta is not revealing the bumped literary figure's name: it is not, of course, Thoreau. But as Coletta says, "some big name had to go, for Clare had to be included! It is not a pretty business, this!"

Clare in the Libraries

The Department of Special Collections, at the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Memorial Library, holds several first editions and a number of contemporary private press editions of Clare's poems. Clare's poetry nicely complements the Chester H. Thordarson Collection, an immense cache of works of natural history, that includes an "elephant folio" edition of Audubon's *Birds of America* and a complete set of Gould's monographs on birds of the world. First editions of Clare's *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* and *The Village Minstrel* belong to this collection, and the Library also owns a first edition of *The Shepherd's Calendar*. Under the guidance of Yvonne Schofer and Jill Rosenshield, the Library has also acquired a number of lavish private press editions of Clare's poems. These works often print a single poem with original illustrations and are characterized by a generous attention to paper, typeface, ink, and binding. The Library's collection includes Orpheus Press' *Lines Written in Northampton County Asylum* (1959), Wymondham's *Toper's Rant* (1974), Tern Press editions of *The Summons* (1989), *The Hue & Cry* (1991), *The Flitting* (1991), and *Woman, Sweet Witchingly Woman* (1993), and Snake River Press' *A Cag of Swipes* (1993).

Scholarly Notes

I have recently started a course of study of Judaism for which the study book is L. Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction* (NY: Paulist Press, 1984). On p. 70 of this book, appear the following sentences:

"ancient Hebrew was written in consonants only, leaving out the vowels. In English, we could easily read many sentences which lacked vowels, as 'Kng Dvd klld tht wckd prsn, th Phlston Glth.' But if the sentence had 'Kng Dvd klld th mn,' should we read

'man' or 'men'? If we see 'Kng Dvd lvd,' does it mean 'lived' or 'loved'? Many Hebrew texts include similar difficulties."

This passage immediately reminded me of those Clare letters that Geoffrey Summerfield and I attempted to transcribe many years ago (See Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, 'John Clare: an Interpretation of Certain Asylum Letters,' *RES*, n.s. xiii (1962): 135-46). Could Clare have been aware of this characteristic of Hebrew? He was widely read in religious literature. Does any of his books at Northampton discuss this matter?

When I made this suggestion to my wife, Victoria, she at first discounted it, saying she had done the same thing as a child when making up a secret language. But it later transpired that she had done this in collaboration with a Jewish girlfriend.

—Eric Robinson