



Newsletter

Volume 4, January 2002

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. Send submissions to Sarah Zimmerman, Dept. of English, Fordham University, 113 W. 60th St., New York, NY 10023; or: zimmerman@fordham.edu

John Clare Conference To Be Held in 2003

The John Clare Society of North America will hold its first annual conference in Elkridge, Maryland on March 21-22, 2003. This international scholarly conference will explore new approaches to the poetry and prose of John Clare. The conference is intended to infuse Clare studies with the energy and excitement of new work on Clare by both younger and more-established scholars. The conference program will investigate new directions in Clare scholarship and celebrate the completion of the Oxford English Text edition of John Clare's poetry, edited by Eric Robinson, David Powell, and Paul Dawson.

The John Clare Conference will be held at the Belmont Conference Center, a full-service conference center located on the grounds of an elegant eighteenth-century estate. It is just 8 miles from Baltimore-Washington International Airport. Further information about the conference, and a call for papers, is enclosed with this newsletter. Queries and proposals should be sent by e-mail to James McKusick, John Clare Conference Director: mckusick@umbc.edu

The Poet and the Place: Exhibition, Lecture

The exhibition opens March 7, 2002 with a lecture and slide show by Peter Moyses in the McCormick

Lecture Hall in Bar Harbor, Maine from 4:30-5:00 p.m. After the lecture there will be a reception coupled with a poetry reading of Clare's poems. Posted alongside each poem will be a photograph by Peter Moyses as well as the works of Carry Akroyd and Ian Stephens (from the Van Deventer collection). Moyses will have 25 photos matted and framed (20"x16"). Akroyd's silk-screen, "Spreading Oak" (20"x28") and Stephen's wood engraving, "Sudden Shower" will also be shown. Eight readers will present Clare's poetry in a setting planned to represent the "Poet and His Place." Peter will read as well as George V. Van Deventer, two students from the college, and four other poets from the state of Maine. The Clare show has been coordinated by George V. Van Deventer, 117 Fitch Rd., Washington, ME, 04574, Tel: 207-845-2476, member of the Clare Society, and Bonnie Gilfillan, Associate Director of Special Events, College of the Atlantic, 105 Eden St., Bar Harbor, ME 04609, USA, Tel: 207-288-5015, ext. 254. The exhibition runs March 7-April 5, 2002.

2001 MLA Panel on Clare and Bloomfield in New Orleans

On 29 December 2001, the JCSNA sponsored the third John Clare panel at the MLA convention under our status as an Affiliate Organization of the MLA. The session, "Clare and Bloomfield: Romanticism, Influence, and Material Culture," chaired by W. John Coletta of the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, featured papers by Bruce Edward Graver of Providence College, John Goodridge of Nottingham Trent Univ., and Misty A. Beck of Washington Univ.

Bruce Edward Graver's paper, "Bloomfield in America" (perhaps, as Prof. Graver suggested, the first paper ever read at the MLA on Robert Bloomfield), cogently examined the early American publications of Bloomfield's *Farmer's Boy* and *Rural Tales, Ballads and Songs*, in order to begin to assess Bloomfield's reception in the U.S. Within 5 years of the London publications of both books, there were seven editions of *FB* and five of *RTBS*, facts which suggest that Bloomfield was one of the most popular British poets in early 19th-century America. The paper looked at published comments about the poems in American periodicals, the different prefatory material in the American editions of Bloomfield, as well as the bibliographic characteristics of these editions (with special emphasis on book illustrations). Prof. Graver argued that, in a nation of independent farmers which prided itself on having cast off the British class system, Bloomfield was read differently from how he was read in Britain, and that Americans tended to identify much more closely with his life story than the British, who regarded him as a curiosity

rather than as a genuinely serious literary artist.

John Goodridge's paper, "Female Storytellers in Clare and Bloomfield," wonderfully explored the intersection of literary art and cultural anthropology. His paper showed that the narrative strategies employed in some of Bloomfield's and Clare's poetry had been and were to some extent still powerful narrative strategies employed by the real men and women of those poets' own local cultures, cultures that had for many generations revolved around the "powerful tradition of oral storytelling." As Prof. Goodridge pointed out, "this tradition," both the poetic and the cultural one, "is not by any means an exclusively female tradition: both poets also use male narrators. But it is the female narrators who are most richly portrayed, and who seem to bring a particular vitality and urgency to their storytelling." This storytelling performs several key cultural functions: it serves as a "repository of knowledge and an unofficial education in the rural world"; it enacts and re-enacts a deep "folk memory," serving as a kind of conduit of cultural DNA; and it serves as "a form of entertainment, a way of beguiling time and labour." Prof. Goodridge usefully placed his paper in the context of Mary Collier's belief in women's right to talk in the harvest fields as expressed in her "The Woman's Labour," a "robust and witty reply" to the "slander" of women fieldworkers in Stephen Duck's "The Thresher's Labour." Prof. Goodridge, citing and discussing among other poems Bloomfield's "The Horkeyand Clare's "The Crossroads or the Haymakers Story" and "The Sorrows of Love or the Broken Heart," shows how "women's

right to talk in the fields was worth defending,” given its important cultural functions, and what it was that female storytellers may in fact have been saying.

Misty Beck's paper, "'A Strange Intrinsic Beauty': Enclosure and John Clare's Power of Vision," was a delightfully eclectic one that combined nicely an implicitly E. P. Thompsonian approach, a language-oriented (even phenomenological) criticism based on Elaine Scarry's work on perception and the imagination, and a genre-based and New Historical criticism centering on versions of the pastoral. Focusing primarily on Clare's "The Bean Field" and "The Moors," the paper (1) shows how Clare "naturalizes [the] pastoral oppositions" of city and country and (2) shows how what she calls Clare's "visual mimesis" replaces the earlier "imitative structure or stance of pastoral" (the "imitating" of "the forms of rural life to comment on love or loss") with an ontologically rich natural history of the origin and continuity of "the shared perception of objects" that knits natural and human communities together. Among the paper's many strengths is how Scarry's work on perception and imagination is made to fit Clare's political and aesthetic aims so aptly.

W. John Coletta

John Clare Society U.K. Report, 2001

The John Clare Society celebrated its twentieth birthday in 2001 by inviting one of its three founders, Clare biographer Edward Storey—now resident in Wales—back to Helpston to address the annual Clare Festival. Some North American Clareans, I know, have

attended the festival on various occasions. For those who don't know the event, I can report that it was, as always, a most pleasant get-together for Clare enthusiasts. It is held every year on the Saturday nearest to Clare's birthday (13 July), although it really begins the previous afternoon, when the children of the John Clare Primary School in Helpston bring 'midsummer cushions' of flowered turfs that they have made, place them round Clare's gravestone, sing songs and read poems. The festival itself is a fairly easygoing mixture of walks, talks, readings and musical events lasting through the day and into the evening. Next year is the Society's twenty-first birthday, of course, and for the first time the festival will run from Friday to Sunday, giving visitors from further afield more to do and see.

On 6 July, just over a week before this year's festival, there was an interesting and ambitious event at St Catherine's College, Oxford, entitled 'Crossing Borders: John Clare, James Hogg and Their Worlds'. This day conference was devised and organised by two young scholars, Simon Kövesi of the John Clare Society, and Meiko O'Halloran of the James Hogg Society. Taking their hint from Valentina Bold's 1994 essay on Clare and Hogg (published in *The Independent Spirit* collection), they used the idea of putting these two very different (but in some ways very similar) figures together to invite wider discussion of 'borders' in relation to English and Scottish 'self-taught' traditions in poetry. Sam Ward has given a brief account of the papers given, in the *John Clare Society Newsletter*. I would only add here that one's overall impression of the conference was of new doors opening, not only in Clare studies,

but in ideas of Scotland and England in a key period of history. The organisers are gathering the papers together and will edit a volume of them in due course.

In July, too, there was a new play about Clare, 'Grass', by Simon Rae, put on at the Etcetera Theatre in Camden, London, in a double-bill with a play about William Blake. There has been a distinguished progression of plays about Clare in recent years, though they have not been very widely known (with the possible exceptions of Edward Bond's *The Fool*, and Roger Frith's 'A Song in the Night'—the latter known mainly for the actor Freddie Jones's memorable performance as Clare). This is the second time Simon Rae has had a go at the subject of Clare. I was unable to attend, but those who did go tell me it was well worth seeing. Clare was on BBC Radio Four twice on the same day this year. The author Ronald Blythe, on the popular programme 'Desert Island Discs', chose as one of his eight records, a recording of Ted Hughes reading Clare's 'The Nightingale's Nest' in Westminster Abbey. In the 'At Home with Healey' series, critic Tom Paulin joined musicians Gordon Tyrrall and Geoff Bowen to play, sing and talk about Clare as a musician. Tyrrall made a fine folk record of Clare material two years ago. The second 'John Clare Day', held at Earl's Barton, Northamptonshire, on 28 April, again featured music by Ock'n'Dough, as well as a range of talks on Clare-related topics.

The Clare Forum at Nottingham Trent University held three events this year. In January the present writer spoke on Clare in relation to the 'Choice' tradition of rural-retreat poetry. In June Alan Vardy of City University of New York

spoke on Clare and Politics. And in November we hosted another Bloomfield event, together with the fledgling Robert Bloomfield Society. John Lucas gave a wonderfully anecdotal talk on what interests him about Bloomfield, and there were readings and discussions aplenty. The Bloomfield Society also ran a coach outing to 'Bloomfield Country' (Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, and the surrounding area), and produced the first two numbers of its newsletter.

Last year I mentioned the 'Marymede' housing development, built on and around the site of Clare's beloved Crossberry Way in Helpston. Now another crucial part of Clare's Helpston is threatened with development. This is the piece of land immediately behind Clare's cottage, part of an ancient meadow, some of it never ploughed, and containing important and rare plants. A twelve-house scheme for developing it was recently rejected by Peterborough City Council, but now a second, ten-house scheme has been put forward and is being considered by the planning authorities. Friends of the Earth, English Nature, and some of Clare's descendants have expressed concern about the project, and objections have been lodged by the Clare Society and others including the author Edward Storey, whose letter eloquently asks whether such a scheme would even have been put forward if Shakespeare rather than Clare had been born at Helpston.

Edward Storey, as I mentioned earlier, is one of the three founders of the Clare Society, and I am sorry to have to end by reporting the death of another founder, George Dixon, who died on 28 November. George was for many years



Rosy Goodridge (age 7) looks over the midsummer cushions round Clare's gravestone, 13 July 2001

the Society's Treasurer, but his involvement with Clare went back much further than that. His grandfather Nathan Dixon had been a keen Clare

enthusiast, who published a poem to Clare and donated important manuscripts to the Peterborough collection. A few years ago George quietly passed on to the Society's archive a wonderful treasure-trove of press cuttings and memorabilia, showing all the many local Clare activities he had initiated or been involved in over the decades. It was thanks to a few individuals like George that Clare's memory was kept alive in Clare country, even when the literary world seemed to forget the poet altogether, and he will be greatly missed.

John Goodridge
john.goodridge@ntu.ac.uk

The John Clare Society of North America: A Brief History

The John Clare Society of North America (JCSNA) was founded in 1997 as a nonprofit literary society. The purposes of the JCSNA are as follows: to promote the study of the works and life of John Clare; to promote the collection, preservation, and exchange of items of literary and biographical interest; to promote a wider appreciation of Clare and the continuing publication of his works; to advocate the protection of Clare's countryside; and to encourage rural education and sensitivity to rural landscapes. The JCSNA is an autonomous affiliate of the John Clare Society based in Helpston, England. North American members receive all the benefits and publications of both societies, including the annual newsletter of the JCSNA, the U.K. quarterly newsletter, and the annual *John Clare Society Journal*. Members are invited to attend events held in the U.K. and North America, and they are informed of new publications and recordings of Clare's poetry and prose.

In 1998 the JCSNA was incorporated in the state of Maryland, and it was subsequently recognized by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt 501 (c)(3) organization. Donations to the JCSNA are tax-deductible to the extent provided by law.

In January 2000 the Modern Language Association approved the application of the JCSNA for affiliate organization status. This status entitles the Society to organize one session per year at the MLA Convention. As an affiliate organization, the JCSNA joins the eminent ranks of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association, the Keats-Shelley Association, and other distinguished literary societies. MLA approval of the JCSNA as an affiliate organization accords a distinctive mark of national recognition to the quality of the publications and scholarly activities organized by the Society.

The JCSNA is administered by an Executive Committee comprised of the officers of the Society: Eric Robinson (President), Bridget Keegan (Vice President), James McKusick (Executive Director), Scott McEathron (Program Chair), and Sarah Zimmerman (Newsletter Editor). In addition, an Advisory Board is composed of scholars and writers of distinguished reputation who agree to serve in an advisory capacity to the Society. The current Advisory Board members are Anne Barton, Galway Kinnell, Mark L. Reed, and David E. Simpson.

In 2002 a website was created to provide public information about the JCSNA and its activities: www.johnclare.org

James McKusick