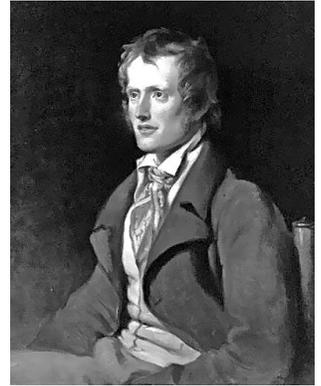


The John Clare Society of North America

Newsletter

Volume Twenty-One, February 2020



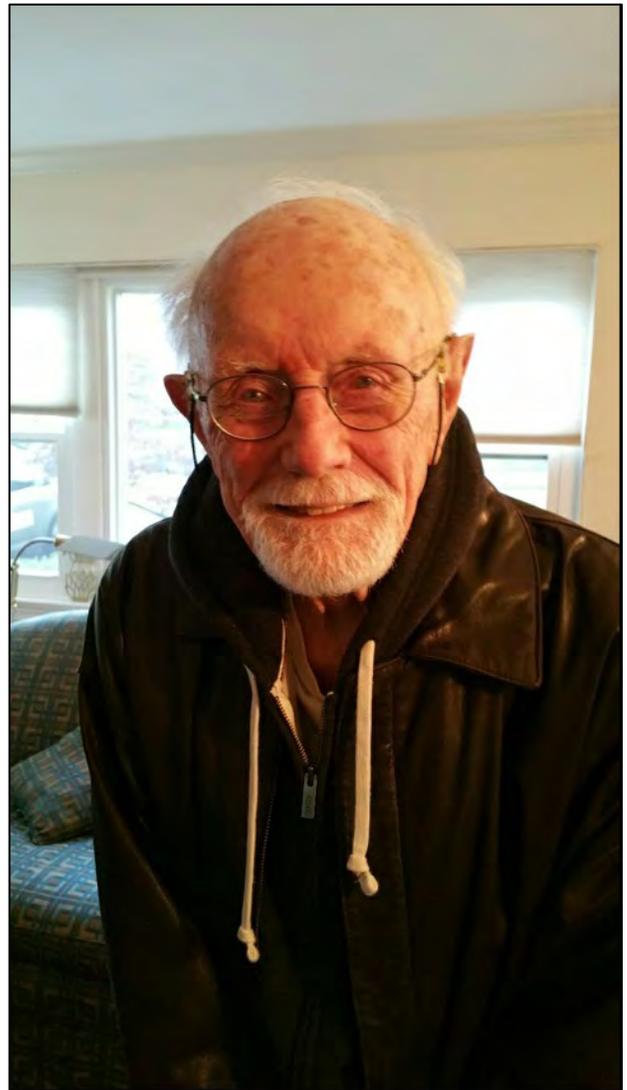
From the Editor

This year's volume of the *Newsletter* contains four poems by Barbara Wiedemann, a report on the panel at the MLA convention, a CFP for next year's MLA Convention, a remembrance of Eric Robinson, 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).



Eric Robinson, 1924–2019

Musings
Four Poems
by *Barbara Wiedemann*

A Moment for the Soul

You almost don't want to breathe
as if breathing could disturb everything,
disturb the lodgepole pines and Douglas firs,
disturb the aspens with their white trunks and
trembling leaves,
disturb the alpine meadow and the scattered patches
of snow,
even disturb the sky with its blue deepened by altitude
and beneath that blue the white yarrow, the red
poppies
and the yellow and purple of others.
You don't want to breathe
as if breathing could upset the balance
but then you want to absorb it all
so you breathe deeply.

The Gift

Dinosaurs had almost two-hundred million years
before that fateful asteroid kicked up dust and ash,
blocking the sun's radiation,
dooming those giants.
Our primate ancestors, those that pioneered walking
on two legs
appeared maybe four million years ago
and 200,000 years ago Homo Sapiens showed up.
We are so young, babies really,
but we are also doomed
but by our own arrogance.

After the fires rage in New Mexico, California and
elsewhere
after the pine beetles decimate the Colorado forests,
after the arctic melts and the seas rise,
after the droughts and super storms
after the earth can't sustain us,
we will join the dinosaurs.

But somewhere, somehow life will continue.
And maybe the next time the evolved creatures
will recognize the gift they were given.

Nature's Mysteries

My old running shoes
now relegated to walks and bike riding
are drying on the hood of my van
after a hike on the Briggs Creek Trail
a trail that went through mud
and creek crossings.
These worn-out sneakers
are now a prized find
for numerous bees
as they hover near
and crawl over,
little tongues tasting
and sampling and ingesting
who knows what
but a delicacy for sure.

The Unschooled Bird Watcher

There it is again
a reddish brown hummingbird
the whir of its wings announces it.
My personal tick list would be high
I've traveled the world,
been to beaches and grasslands,
mountain tops and canyons,
deserts and rain forests
and quietly sat
absorbed by the surroundings
but all I can say,
it's a blue and grey bird
or it makes a clicking noise
or there are two brown cranes
in a meadow near Mt. Lassen.
Still they bring me pleasure
but I would see more if I knew more.
And now in the mountains near the Rogue River
another bird sings to me
a common looking brown bird
but an uncommonly beautiful song.



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 2020 MLA Convention**
by Nancy Derbyshire

This year's session for the John Clare Society of North America at the MLA Convention in Seattle was entitled "John Clare: Conversations in Song." The session was organized and chaired by Erica McAlpine (St. Edmund Hall, University of Oxford) and included three scholars studying Clare's use of sound and song in his poetry: Elizabeth Helsinger (University of Chicago), Jeffrey Dorries (University of Pittsburgh at Titusville), and Stephanie Kuduk Weiner (Wesleyan University). Their papers were enjoyed by a good-sized audience who responded to the panel's themes of personification, onomatopoeia, and song.

In "The air hummed melodies around: Clare, Personification, and the Conversation Poem," Helsinger explored how Clare's poetry incorporates "self-personifying things," as he put it, into a poetry that can be read within the Romantic tradition of the conversation poem. In Clare's case, however, the focus is on conversations with and among non-human entities. Referring to such interlocutors as Coleridge, Wordsworth, Martin Buber, and William Blair, Helsinger argued that through the use of onomatopoeitic language (including many local dialect terms) muttered, hummed, or sung in verse, Clare returns the "greetings" of bird and beast in a shared language of sound. His poems thus enable human readers to listen to, converse with, and socialize with the non-human, thereby entering a "sociable world of being" where poetry extends the life of song. In short, Clare's personifications and his own responses perform nature's sounds to create "song's eternity"—a perpetually renewed conversation that includes the human within a larger sociable world.

In "Sounds that Cannot Be Written: Animal Communication in John Clare and Gilbert White," Dorries demonstrated the ecological

presence of White and Clare's natural history prose, and showed how they shared the same insights about animal communication as contemporary scientific researchers like Jeffrey Boswall. Dorries illustrated White's careful observations and speculations about individual animals' communiques and posed White's interpretive dilemma of whether a given call or song belonged to a specific bird or represented a regional difference in a species. Similarly, Clare meticulously listened to and attempted to transcribe bird songs; but in distinction from White, Clare recreated sounds via onomatopoeia and describing artificial imitations (e.g., the call of the butter bump can be imitated by "the sound of a cooper's mallet hitting on empty casks") and attempted to interpret and understand birds' behaviors, nesting, and flight. Together, White and Clare inspire Boswall, a naturalist who also concludes the possibility of intentional and customized animal communication.

The panel concluded with Weiner's talk on "Vocality and Printedness in Clare Poems Entitled 'Song' and 'Ballad.'" Weiner noted that Clare's corpus includes hundreds of so-named "songs" and "ballads," and that these titles function both as generic categories and as proper names for individual pieces. She argued that the titles invite us not only to read such compositions as printed poems but also to listen to and even sing them. Drawing on Helsinger's pioneering approach in *Poetry and the Thought of Song in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (University of Virginia Press, 2015), Weiner focused on the songs and ballads that Clare interspersed throughout his late-period poem "Child Harold." She showed how the contrast between the poem's base texture of modified Spenserian stanzas and its musical interruptions generates an "intermedial space" uniting printed poetry and musical song. She traced the visual, aural, and thematic axes of this contrast in the poem's opening pages. Weiner also played a recent audio recording of an oral performance of Robert Tannahill's "Jessie, The Flow'r o' Dumblane," which Clare reworks in the second musical interlude of "Child Harold." Clare's "Song" contains many verbal echoes of Tannahill's lyrics and perfectly fits its melody. By linking his "Song" to this well-known piece, Weiner asserted, Clare adds layers of sound, meaning, and emotional resonance to his own composition. For Weiner, the intertextual and

intermedial space of Clare's song writing invites readers to enact song, both as a part of silent reading and as a script for performance with the living voice.



Nancy Derbyshire is Assistant Professor of English at the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Call for Papers

The John Clare Society of North America invites proposals for its guaranteed session at the Modern Language Association Convention in Toronto, 7–10 January 2021. Scholarship on any aspect of Clare's life and writings is welcome. Please submit an abstract and short bio by 13 March 2020 to Erica McAlpine (erica.mcalpine@ell.ox.ac.uk).

Eric Robinson 1924–2019: A Personal Reflection by Roger Rowe and Victorian Robinson

(This article originally appeared in the John Clare Society Newsletter, U.K., no. 136)

It was around twelve years ago in the Primary School in Helpston on the Saturday of the John Clare Society Festival. As part of the Committee of the Society, I was on the look-out for those who seemed to be alone, and who might be in need of some direction. An elderly gentleman I did not know came into the room blinking from the strong sunlight, looking a bit lost. I pounced on him: 'It's so good to see you, sir,' I stammered. 'Can I be of any help?' Little did I realise that this

would be the start of more than a decade of stories, laughter, meticulous study and the prompting of John Clare publications of my own.

So this must be the famous Professor Robinson of whom I had heard so much! Working with him in the Clare Archives in Peterborough Central Library, I was reminded more than once of the considerable difficulties Eric and his team had faced over years of meticulous study in all the various Clare Archives—a study that is still not complete. Asking him recently how long he considered it would be before the Clare manuscripts had given up all their secrets, he replied after some thought, 'Decades and decades, my friend.'

Four or five summers ago, we were sitting opposite one another in the Clare Archive in Peterborough Central Library, when after a particularly intricate piece of pencilled text had been deciphered, Eric looked up, with that mischievous twinkle in his eye and said, 'Roger, you're not much of a scholar, are you?' My heart sank. He looked me straight in the eye: 'More of a gifted amateur, I'd say.'

Having taught in three countries (the UK, Nigeria and USA) and having been married three times (to Rosemary, Joan, then Victoria in 1990), Eric had a full life to draw on when writing his own poetry. The prose-poems from his WWII Navy service—in the North Atlantic on the Murmansk Run—are social history in themselves, with fewer and fewer first-hand witnesses remaining.

Eric always cared about language—about using simple, strong words without a lot of jargon. He remained grateful for his education at King Edward's School in Birmingham, and at Cambridge University. The editing and publishing of John Clare's vast output was his primary passion in life, of course. Amongst his large published output, the magisterial Oxford University Press 'Clarendon' nine-volume edition of Clare's poetry stands as a lasting memorial to Eric and his investigative team. There is hardly an English Faculty across the universities that is not graced by its hefty presence.

Eric, however, was a man of many interests. For example, his teaching and publications in the field of history of technology earned him the Leonardo Da Vinci Medal, the highest scholarly award given by the

Society for the History of Science and Technology.

Speaking ‘the word’—whether lecturing in class, teaching privately or proclaiming the Gospel in church—was also important to him. Teasing out the meaning of a ‘hardly possible to read’ Clare word was a passion of over sixty years, and contained many, many surprises. More than anything else I will miss that mischievous smile. A great Clarean—he was a Vice-President of the John Clare Society—and friend.

Finally, a short extract from ‘The Mistake’, one of Eric’s Clare-related poems. The full version appeared in the John Clare Society Newsletter (U.K.) for February 2017:

I say to him, ‘It is impossible for any man,
Any scholar, any machine to transcribe
Anything without ever making a mistake.
Humankind is imperfect. That is our nature,
And God intended that we should be so.’

The original, written by the poet himself,
Inspired by God, is also imperfect:
Trying to be true to the inspiration
Is only trying. I cross something out,
Because it is not true to God’s inspiration.

I say that the goose is ‘waddling’
Instead of ‘gadding’, because ‘gadding’
Is overdoing it. It’s banal;
And the alliteration is unnecessary.
When I read it again the word seemed
To be ‘gilladdling’. ‘What brilliance!’
I said to myself, and the alliteration
So true to the ‘geese’. I was amazed
By the poet’s inventiveness.

And it took me some time to retreat
From such genius to the mundane.



Recent Academic Writings

Bates, Thomas. “Poet and Sculptor.” *John Clare Society Journal* 38 (2019): 49–60.

Collings, David. “Blank Oblivion, Condemned Life: John Clare’s ‘Obscurity.’” In *Romanticism and Speculative Realism*. Edited by Chris Washington and Anne C. McCarthy. Bloomsbury, 2019.

Gallas, John. “The Heartsease.” *John Clare Society Journal* 38 (2019): 77.

Greene, Amelia Z. “Ruin and Revelation: John Clare’s Eco-Apocalyptic Aesthetics.” *Essays in Romanticism* 26, no. 1 (2019): 55–69.

Heimlich, Timothy. “Repetition and Melancholia in John Clare’s ‘Remembrances.’” *John Clare Society Journal* 38 (2019): 61–76.

Lovett, John. “‘The Lament of Swordy Well’ and the Giving Spirit of Nature.” *John Clare Society Journal* 38 (2019): 78–87.

Ness, Richard M. “Song of Experience: John Clare’s Empirical Taste.” *John Clare Society Journal* 38 (2019): 13–31.

Reno, Seth T. *Amorous Aesthetics: Intellectual Love in Romantic Poetry and Poetics, 1788–1853*. Liverpool University Press, 2019. (chapter 2 on Clare)

Thornton, Kelsey. “Eric Robinson, 1924–2019.” *John Clare Society Journal* 38 (2019): 7–12.

Washington, Chris. *Romantic Revelations: Visions of Post-Apocalyptic Life and Hope in the Anthropocene*. University of Toronto Press, 2019. (chapter 4 on Clare)

Wilson, Nic. “John Clare’s Contemporaries: The Shepherd, The Wheelwright and The Housemaid.” *John Clare Society Journal* 38 (2019): 33–48.



The John Clare Society of North America

Officers of the John Clare Society of North America

The John Clare Society of North America is a non-profit literary organization devoted to the study, preservation, and publication of the works of John Clare. Officers are elected by the membership for a term of five years.

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- ❖ **Vice President:** Stephanie Weiner, Wesleyan University
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- ❖ **Newsletter Editor:** Seth Reno, Auburn University at Montgomery

For further information, please visit www.johnclare.org/ClareOfficers.htm