

Volume Twenty-Two, February 2021

The John Clare Society of North America Newsletter





From the Editor

This past year was bizarre on many fronts. The world was upended by a global pandemic, which paused and strained not only our personal lives but also the activities of professional organizations like the JCSNA. Yet we marched on! There were several Clare-related virtual events, including the annual session at the MLA Convention, as well as some new and exciting publications. This year's newsletter revisits some of those events. It also includes a CFP for next year's MLA Convention, a list of recent academic writings, and, as always, some wonderful new poems by Barbara Wiedemann. I hope you enjoy the volume, and I wish you the best in 2021!

Seth T. Reno (sreno@aum.edu)

Seth Reno is Distinguished Research Associate Professor at Auburn University Montgomery. He is author of *Early Anthropocene Literature in Britain, 1750–1884* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020) and *Amorous Aesthetics: Intellectual Love in Romantic Poetry and Poetics, 1788–1853* (Liverpool University Press, 2019); editor of *Romanticism and Affect Studies* (Romantic Circles, 2018); and co-editor of *Wordsworth and the Green Romantics: Affect and Ecology in the Nineteenth Century* (University of New Hampshire Press, 2016).

Musings: Two Poems by Barbara Wiedemann

Words, Words, Words

All the good words are taken.
I can't string two together
without falling into clichés.
What does the wind do
but caress my skin?
What about the babbling brook
the murmuring of bees
the twittering of birds?
How can I write about this place
with its majestic peaks
the cool mountain air
the spring flowers in August
the velvet carpet of grass,
and even the twang of mosquitos?
How can I write about this place
and not repeat the others?

Here I am in Eagle Cap Wilderness
and I am tongue-tied.
There's something about the sublime
as Wordsworth knew
that humbles and mesmerizes
that sends me searching for words
the way Remington or Frederic Church
reached for paint.

Night in the Idaho Desert

I hate to go to sleep at night
here where the stars and the non-twinkling planets
and the gibbous moon light the desert grasses—
the fescue, sedge, wildrye, and wheatgrass—
their goldness covering the surrounding hills.
I hate to go to sleep at night
here where the silence is all encompassing,
undisturbed by planes, cars, and trucks
undisturbed by the chirps and beeps of the tech-driven life.
I hate to go to sleep at night here in this place
that's far away from the frenzy of the news,
far away from Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram
far away from email and texts,
far away from the world of sound and busyness.
Away from it all I hate to go to sleep at night,
I want to stay immersed in this Idaho desert night.

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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 2021 MLA Convention

This year's session for the John Clare Society of North America at the virtual MLA Convention was entitled "Some Environmental Approaches to John Clare." The session was organized by Erica McAlpine (University of Oxford) and chaired by Jim McKusick (University of Missouri-Kansas City) and included three scholars studying elements of the environment in Clare's writings: Effie Gianitsos (Duke University), Lauren Cooper (Syracuse University), and Jayme Collins (Northwestern University). The panel was well-attended, and a lively discussion followed the presentations.

In "Clare, Habitat, and Burke," Gianitsos offered an insightful close reading "The Mouse's Nest," highlighting Clare's distinctive unwillingness to project Enlightenment ideals on to the mouse and the environment. She argued that the poem's ecology presents a relationship to habitats and habitation that resembles Edmund Burke's counter-enlightenment ideology. Both thinkers frame a proper inhabitant as one that registers the history of its habitat affectively. The form of Clare's sonnet works to "naturalize" and assimilate disruptive forces into the habitat for the sake of conservation. Thus, the habitat is largely an artificially constructed category as opposed to ontologically secure one, symbolically captured by the figure of the nest. In the end, the construction of habitat is a performance of feigning connectivity among objects of the ecosystem, which advocates for a pragmatic relationship to cultural and political



inheritances. By linking Clare's aesthetics to Burke's ideology, Gianitsos expands understandings of both thinkers as conservative and conservationist.

The second paper also focused on a close reading of one important Clare poem. In "John Clare's 'The Lament of Swordy Well' as Wasteland," Cooper proposed that Clare reinvents the concept of "the wild" in the poem, presenting Swordy Well not as a pristine and unmediated place where humanity is not, but as overworked and wasted, a place that humanity has left behind. At the core of her reading is the idea that the poem articulates a local ecosystem that humanity has depleted to the point that it has become distant from or unfamiliar to humanity in a new way and that its claims to attention as a "wild" place call out, paradoxically, for humanity to return to this place and re-work it once again, this time through the medium of the lyric poem. The lyric of Swordy Well is a flexible enough medium to accommodate an "I" which is grounded not in an individual human consciousness, but instead in the interrelational consciousness of an ecosystem. The act of giving voice to Swordy Well disrupts the notion of wilderness as unknowable and distinct from humanity because it relies on the ability to sympathize with and mediate the land itself. Contrary to the forms of environmentalism that value wildernesses as aesthetically pleasing places removed from humanity, Clare's poem insists on the specific wildness of any ecosystem that provides food and shelter to a wide array of living beings, regardless of how unaesthetic and exploited by humanity.

The panel concluded with Collins's paper, "John Clare in Neon: Environmental Crisis and the Poetics of the Field." Collins focused on Simon Cutts's 2004 art installation "After John Clare," which transforms an old stone pump house into the world's first wind-powered neon. By attaching a wind propeller to the front of the small hut,

wiring it to a generator and then to neon lettering installed on the walls within the narrow structure, Cutts encloses a line from John Clare's "Sighing for Retirement" within its nascent pastoral scene: "I found the poems in the fields and only wrote them down." Surrounded by sheep in the middle of a grazing pasture on the Warde-Aldam estate in Northumberland, between an old barn since transformed into a wedding venue and a historic country manor since transformed into a bed and breakfast, "After John Clare" is situated directly among the dynamics of land development and economic transformation that so concerned Clare. Re-articulating Clare's poem across centuries, Cutts makes of this line a new "situated" poem in which the place, means, and medium of poetry's inscription generates its poetics. Collins continued to unfold the Clarean environmental legacy at work in Cutts's situated poem, showing how Cutts translates Clare's environmental poetics of the field into the contemporary moment both to point to a long economic, social, and literary history of the field, and to highlight the import of Clare's environmental ethics as a mode of response to twentieth-century environmental crises.

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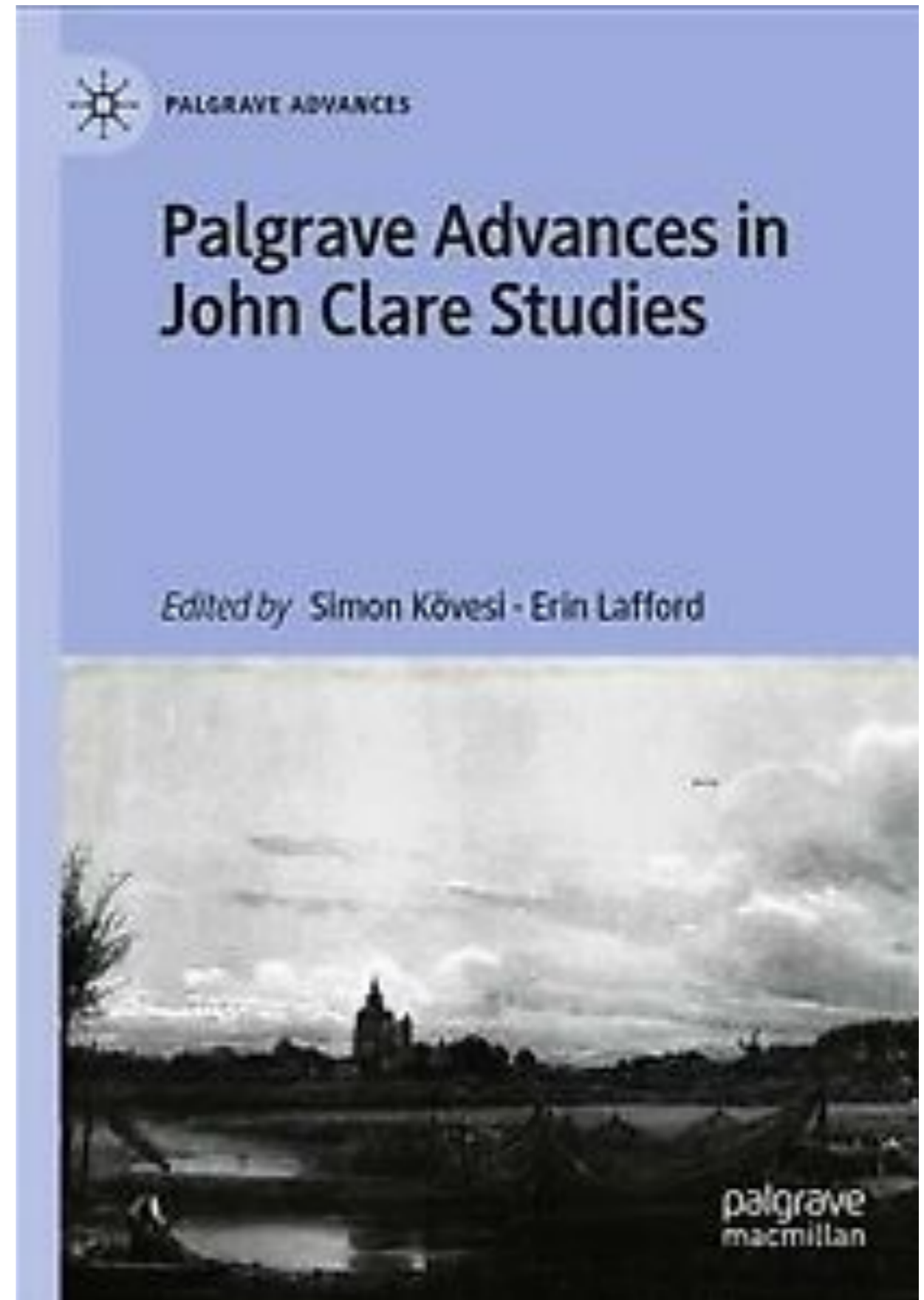
Call For Papers MLA 2022: The JCSNA invites paper proposals for its guaranteed panel at the MLA Convention in Washington, D.C., 6–9 January 2022.

The title of the session is "John Clare and Extravagance." Scholarship on any aspect of Clare's ability to break bounds—stylistically or otherwise. Papers might touch on Clare's resistance to convention, the decadence of his language or subjects, his journey from Essex, or critical responses to his work that "break the rules" in some way. Abstract and short bio by 15 March 2021 to Dr. Erica McAlpine at erica.mcalpine@ell.ox.ac.uk.

New Book Spotlight

Simon Kovesi and Erin Lafford held a virtual book launch for *Palgrave Advances in John Clare Studies* on 19 November 2020, which was attended by over 100 people. Contributors gave brief presentations of their chapters, followed by Q&A, discussion, and celebration of this important new study.

This collection gathers together an exciting new series of critical essays on the Romantic- and Victorian-period poet John Clare, which each take a rigorous approach to both persistent and emergent themes in his life and work. Designed to mark the 200th anniversary of the publication of Clare's first volume of poetry, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, the scholarship collected here both affirms Clare's importance as a major nineteenth-century poet and reveals how his verse continually provokes fresh areas of enquiry. Offering new archival, theoretical, and sometimes corrective insights into Clare's world and work, the essays in this volume cover a multitude of topics, including Clare's immersion in song and print culture, his formal ingenuity, his environmental and ecological imagination, his mental and physical health, and his experience of asylums. This book gives students a range of imaginative avenues into Clare's work, and offers both new readers and experienced Clare scholars a vital set of contributions to ongoing critical debates.



Recent Academic Writings

Guyer, Sara. "Figuring John Clare: Romanticism, Editing, and the Possibility of Justice." *Studies in Romanticism* 51, no. 1 (2020): 3–24.

Hall, Ellis, and Bridget Somekh. *Love's Cold Returning: John Clare's 1841 Odyssey from Essex to Northamptonshire*. Thirteen Eighty One, 2020.

Heyes, Robert. "'my unceasing scribblings in favour of John Clare': Lord Radstock's Letters to John Taylor." *John Clare Society Journal* 39 (2020): 41–54.

Jackson-Houlston, C.M. "'Familiar Birds': John Clare, Vernacular Knowledge, and Poetic Precedents." *John Clare Society Journal* 39 (2020): 71–84.

Kovesi, Simon, ed. *John Clare Society Journal* 39 (2020).

* This special volume of the *JCSJ* marks the 200th anniversary of the publication of Clare's *Poems Descriptive*. The volume contains ten short commentary responses to ten different poems from that volume, by: Scott McEarthron, Emma Mason, John Goodridge, James McKusick, Bridget Keegan, Simon Kovesi, Fiona Stafford, Valerie Pedlar, Erin Lafford, and Sarah Zimmerman.

Kovesi, Simon, ed. *The Meeting: Reading and Writing Through John Clare*. The John Clare Society, 2020.

Kovesi, Simon, and Erin Lafford, eds. *Palgrave Advances in John Clare Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.

* Contributors: David Stewart, Kirsteen McCue, Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, Sara Lodge, Andrew Hodgson, Sarah Houghton-Walker, James Castell, Katey Castellano, Scott Hess, Michael Nicholson, Erin Lafford, and James Whitehead.

Lodge, Sara. "Contested Bounds: John Clare, John Keats, and the Sonnet." *Studies in Romanticism* 51, no. 4 (2020): 533–54.

Nicholson, Michael. "Unheard Swarms: John Clare and Romantic Entomology." *Wordsworth Circle* 51, no. 3 (2020): 338–59.

Poetzsch, Markus. "John Clare and the 'truth of taste'." *John Clare Society Journal* 39 (2020): 55–68.

Stout, Daniel M. "Open Field: On John Clare and the Crisis of Our Critical Method." *Wordsworth Circle* 51, no. 3 (2020): 377–95.

Suetta, Zachary. "Blurred Boundaries: Anger, Identity, and Satire in John Clare's Don Juan." *John Clare Society Journal* 39 (2020): 85–100.



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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For further information, please visit: www.johnclare.org