

Volume Twenty-Four, February 2023

The John Clare Society of North America Newsletter





From the Editor

This year saw the full in-person return of the MLA Convention, along with its annual JCSNA panel, along with other professional and social events—and some new and exciting publications on John Clare. This year’s newsletter celebrates those events and publications, and it also includes a CFP for next year’s MLA Convention in Philadelphia, a list of recent academic writings on Clare, and, as always, some wonderful new poems by Barbara Wiedemann (Professor Emerita, Auburn University at Montgomery). I hope you enjoy the volume, and, if you’re like me, I hope you’re looking forward to a wonderful year and warmer weather. Like Clare, “I love to see the summer beaming forth / And white wool sack clouds sailing to the north / I love to see the wild flowers come again / And mare blobs stain with gold the meadow drain.”

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, 2020) and *Amorous Aesthetics: Intellectual Love in Romantic Poetry and Poetics, 1788–1853* (Liverpool University Press, 2019); editor of *The Anthropocene: Approaches and Contexts for Literature and the Humanities* (Routledge, 2021) and *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

The Gift of Magic

The water sparkles and shimmers
in the sudden onslaught of a breeze
that ruffles the surface
of the far shore of Mill Lake,
this high-altitude alpine lake
north of the Colorado village of Ohio City
population sixty-two.

There is magic in the world.

Two butterflies search for nectar
visiting yellow flowers,
perhaps dwarf golden asters,
and pause to greet each other

a dragonfly darts by,
wings gossamer and body iridescent blue

even the brown back of a fly
shines gold in the sun.

There is still magic in the world.

The breeze strengthens
all the lake glitters
like the Milky Way,
like diamonds,
like snow and ice crystals in the sun.

Slow down and be still and the magic is yours.

A Lost Paradise

There are water hyacinths
 clogging southern lakes and rivers,
kudzu
 crawling over seven million acres,
zebra mussels
 infesting the Great Lakes
tamarisk and Russian thistle
 spreading in the West.

All invasive, all disruptive.

And in Wyoming
in the Wind River Range
at Lake Louise, miles from any town
yellow toadflax

 with deep woody roots
 outcompetes native species
 for sunlight and nutrients

Spotted knapweed
 beautiful with its feathery purple petals
 releases a toxin into the soil
 preventing growth of nearby plants

Hounds-tongue
 with its deep red cup flowers
 and burr-like adhesive seeds
 is toxic to horses and cattle
and so many others disrupt the balance dislodge the rightful heirs.

And our contribution—
 hills denuded of timber
 prairies plowed into corn fields
 mountains ravaged by mining
 salmon runs lost to dams.

More disruption and destruction.



Proceedings of the John Clare Panel at the 2022 MLA Convention

by James McKusick

This year's session for the John Clare Society of North America at the MLA Convention in San Francisco was entitled "John Clare: Now and Then." The session was organized by Erica McAlpine (University of Oxford) and chaired by James McKusick (University of Missouri-Kansas City). The session featured three scholars working on ecological approaches to Clare: Tobias Menely (University of California, Davis), Brian McGrath (Clemson University), and Karen Swann (Williams College).

In "Rewilding with John Clare," Menely related the meaning of wildness in Clare's verse to the current rewilding initiatives around Helpston. For Clare, a wilderness or waste is something fragile, a precarious site of self-willed activity. "Rewilding," for Clare and his contemporaries, would have had negative connotations, a symptom of rural depopulation and imperial decline. But Clare nonetheless articulates a practice of rewilding, of human restraint leading to revitalization, in "The Lament of Swordy Well." Drawing on fieldwork undertaken in April 2022, Menely situated Clare's representation of wildness in relation to current rewilding practices. For George Monbiot, Clare's depiction of species now absent (such as corncrakes, nightjars, and wildcats) facilitates the reconstruction of an ecological baseline. Yet, supported by the Langdyke Countryside Trust and the John Clare Countryside Project, some of the biodiversity Clare wrote about has returned. For example, Swaddywell Pit ("Swordy Well")—used as a dumping ground for much of the twentieth century—is now a refuge for great crested newts and a



variety of plants, insects, and birds. In “The Progress of Rhyme,” Clare envisions a song on the other side of georgic progress, nature’s verdant negation of the poet’s makerly endeavor. Poesy is not Clare’s flower; Clare is poesy’s weed.

In “Hedging Against Enclosure: Clare’s Hesitations,” McGrath examined the trope of the hedge in the poetry of John Clare, who is well known for lamenting various acts of enclosure. With poems about the hedge sparrow and the hedgehog, Clare discovers in hedges metaphors for abundant life and modes of living that challenge human narcissism. While hedges are records of human attempts to determine boundaries, to divvy up the land for human use, hedges also offer protection for nests of various species of bird (like the hedge sparrow) and are also frequent pathways for animals (like the hedgehog), used for traveling across a sometimes otherwise inhospitable landscape. One species’ boundary line is another species’ highway. For these reasons and others, hedges, which were dug up in the twentieth century at sometimes alarming rates (to expand industrial farming), are increasingly coming under governmental protection. McGrath explored the hedge not only as a technology for enclosure but also, for Clare, a source for poetry and work to connect Clare’s writing to contemporary environmental policy.

In “Clare Among the Ruins,” Swann observed that Clare’s attachment to his native Helpston afforded him lived connections to the history of the region. In a dry part of Helpston’s Roman Bank he found caches of “pooties” (snail shells), including a species introduced by the Romans as a culinary delicacy. As the remains of Roman feasts, the pooties prompt Clare’s speculations about ancient history—the Roman occupation of Britain that “haunts” the present—and the geological and ecological changes of the landscape itself. Swann explored Clare’s interest in these

ancient remains, turned up by the ditch-digger engaged in modern efforts to subdue and transform the landscape, which suggest to him the simultaneity of multiple pasts with the present. Swann sought to connect Clare’s thinking about the co-existence of ancient and modern time to his own positioning as England’s “peasant poet.” On the one hand, a modern print culture tended to cast him as an anachronism, the representative of an older agrarian world precariously surviving into a modern reorganization of land and agriculture. At the same time, Clare’s own poetic and natural history writing registers the presence of unresolved or unsubsumed pasts, both as protest and in its formal organization. Clare’s distinctive (and obstinate) formal choices embody his own resistance to a capitalist modernity.

James McKusick serves as executive director of the John Clare Society of North America and president of the Wordsworth-Coleridge Association. He is author of *Green Writing: Romanticism and Ecology* (Palgrave, 2000). He is Professor Emeritus at the University of Missouri–Kansas City.

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Call For Papers MLA 2024: The JCSNA invites paper proposals for its guaranteed panel at the MLA Convention in Philadelphia, 4–7 January 2024.

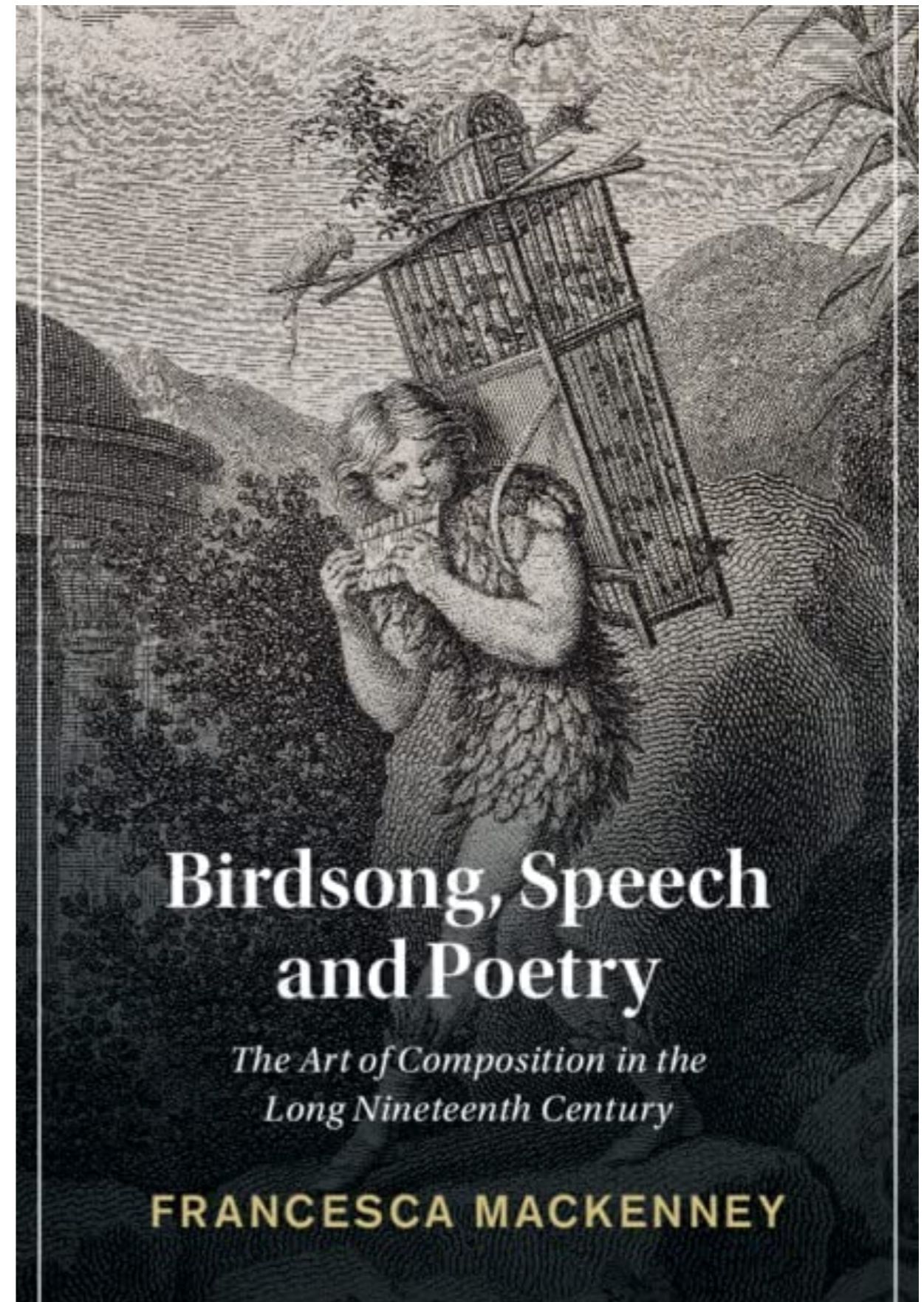
Scholarship on any aspect of Clare’s poetry, prose, life, and/or sphere of influence.

Abstract and short bio by 17 March 2023 to Erica McAlpine at erica.mcalpine@ell.ox.ac.uk

New Book Spotlight

Francesca Mackenney's new book, *Birdsong, Speech, and Poetry* (Cambridge UP, 2022), contains much discussion and analysis of John Clare's poetry.

In the long nineteenth century, scientists discovered striking similarities between how birds learn to sing and how children learn to speak. Tracing the “science of birdsong” as it developed from the “ingenious” experiments of Daines Barrington to the evolutionary arguments of Charles Darwin, Francesca Mackenney reveals a legacy of thought that informs, and consequently affords fresh insights into, a canonical group of poems about birdsong in the Romantic and Victorian periods. With a particular focus on the writings of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the Wordsworth siblings, John Clare, and Thomas Hardy, her book explores how poets responded to an analogy that challenged definitions of language and therefore of what it means to be human. Drawing together responses to birdsong in science, music, and poetry, her distinctive interdisciplinary approach challenges many of the long-standing cultural assumptions that have shaped (and continue to shape) how we respond to other creatures in the Anthropocene.



Recent Academic Writings

Broadhead, Alex. "John Clare's Early Experiments in Dialect Writing: The Case of 'Love Epistles between Richard and Kate.'" *John Clare Society Journal* 41 (2022): 5–24.

Chirico, Paul. "Late Reading: John Clare and John Keats." In *Keats's Reading / Reading Keats*. Edited by Beth Lau, Greg Kucich, and Daniel Johnson. Palgrave Macmillan, 2022. 219–238.

Choudhury, Moinak. "'Botanical arrangements': John Clare, Parataxis, and Common Sense." *John Clare Society Journal* 41 (2022): 55–68.

Heyes, Robert. "John Clare and The Anniversary." *John Clare Society Journal* 41 (2022): 87–95.

Holmes, Eliza. "John Clare: Scavenger Poet." *ISLE* 29, vol. 1 (2022): 40–60.

Keegan, Bridget. "Speaking for Trees: An Argument for Margaret Cavendish's Influence on John Clare." *John Clare Society Journal* 41 (2022): 45–54.

Kita, Kazutake. "Textures of John Clare's Sonnets: A Corpus-Based Structural Comparison between Three Master Sonneteers." *John Clare Society Journal* 41 (2022): 69–85.

Mackenny, Francesca. *Birdsong, Speech, and Poetry: The Art of Composition in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge University Press, 2022.

Nuding, Emma. "Gazing on Guthlacian Reliques: John Clare's Pilgrim-Tourists and St. Guthlac of Crowland." *John Clare Society Journal* 41 (2022): 25–44.





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.

President: Bridget Keegan, Creighton University

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Program Chair: Erica McAlpine, St. Edmund Hall, University of Oxford

Newsletter Editor: Seth Reno, Auburn University at Montgomery

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