The New Criterion

Books

December 2003

John Clare: freedom & enclosure

by Paul Dean

A review of I Am: The Selected Poetry of John Clare, edited by Jonathan Bate.

The life span of John Clare (1793–1864) runs from Pitt to Palmerston, Washington to Lincoln, Blake and Burns to Trollope and Tennyson; yet the essential features of his world were contained within a few square miles clustered around his birthplace, Helpston, Northamptonshire, in the east of England, a village containing about sixty families. Clare never went as far east as Cambridge or further north than Boston, Lincolnshire, the latter affording him his one view of the sea; he became nervous if he moved more than two or three miles away from Helpston. His four trips to London might as well have been visits to Mars, and he was regarded by the inhabitants of the city much as a Martian might have been. He amassed a great quantity of country lore and was skilled in several trades, he could boast a library of four hundred books and was a ruggedly independent critic of what he read, he had several volumes of published poetry to his credit, but his lifelong lack of Standard English spelling, grammar, and punctuation brought condescension and emendation down on his head.

Only in the twentieth century, thanks to the labors of a succession of editors, pre-eminently David Powell and Eric Robinson, was his voice heard in its native accents. Now, with the appearance of a judicious, modern-spelling selection of his poems and a magnificent new biography, both by Jonathan Bate, [1] we can appreciate the fullness of his achievement and the odds against which it was won.

On the evening of the day Clare was born, Charlotte Corday assassinated Marat in his bath. Bate calls him “a war baby,” growing up in revolutionary times, with which he was out of sympathy both by temperament and environment. A non-partisan conservative and a conservationist, he always referred to the Civil War as “the rebellion of Oliver Cromwell” and, though himself no churchgoer, likened the “enthusiastic ravings” of Methodists or Calvinists to “the bellowings of Bedlam.” (He was briefly a Primitive Methodist in the early 1820s, but the attraction waned.) By an accident of geography, Helpston and its surroundings were untypical of rural England in several ways. They were not the completely isolated fastness portrayed by early writers on Clare; he was within reach of Market Deeping, which had a theater and postal links to London, and of Stamford, which had a thriving cultural life and two (later three) newspapers. Weekly markets provided an opportunity to exchange news.

Helpston, then, was no backwater. The respect in which it was old-fashioned was its rural economy. Bate explains:

> An unusually high proportion of Helpston villagers held common rights. An unusually large area of the parish consisted of heathland and “wastes” from which the commoners

> could gather fuel. And the open fields survived until an unusually late date [the last of all until 1898].

By the time of the passing of the Enclosure Act for Helpston and district in 1809, Clare was sixteen. All his formative years had been spent in an open world of individually owned strips of land, dispersed around three major fields—Lolham Bridge, Heath, and Woodcroft—bounded by Royce Wood and Oxey Wood, with the common grazing land of Emmonsales Heath beyond. The reader of Clare quickly becomes acquainted with these names, and with others which held talismanic significance for him, such as Langley Bush and Swordy Well. These were the scenes of what he recalled as an idyllic childhood of freedom, roaming among a landscape whose every contour he knew and loved, “the sweet retreat of twenty lingering years.”

The effects of enclosure upon this old world, which had lasted since the Middle Ages in a village which still kept the pre-Reformation festive year, were devastating. All sense of community, of intimacy between people and land, was roughly cast aside as roads were built, fields were parcelled out into rectangles, fences were erected, trees felled, and streams diverted. The common land passed into the hands of private owners, whose message to the villagers was stark and simple: “No Trespassing.” In one of his greatest poems, “Remembrances,” Clare turns on this process with cold fury:

> Enclosure like a Bonaparte let not a thing
>
> remain,
> It levelled every bush and tree and levelled
>
> every hill
> And hung the moles for traitors—
>
> though the brook is running still,
> It runs a naked stream, cold and chill.

Bate cites a suggestive essay by John Barrell on the sense of place in Clare, the tension between the circular rhythms of the parish and the linear restrictions imposed by Enclosure. That is the key to Clare’s psychology, to his writing, his life, and his eventual mental collapse. He is a sufferer from spiritual claustrophobia. The cramped cottage in which he was born and grew up did not bother him; the restrictions on his wanderings over heath and common were an agony.

Clare lost his twin sister before they were a month old. This, Bate suggests, was also decisive in shaping his obsession with the lost innocence of childhood. In a poem written when he was fifty-five, he enumerates the beloved memories once more, then writes, “All forget us before we are men.” It is our present selves who are forgotten by our past, not the other way round. To be an adult is to be an exile. What saves this from sentimentality is the precision of Clare’s observations: he calls the roll of pellitory (a nettle-like plant), henbane, mallows, princess-feather tree, and green-linnet’s nest, shaming our ignorance. Significantly, Clare could make nothing of the Linnaean taxonomy of plants, with its Latin names and tidy categories, which, in Bate’s words, “did not answer to his perception of the wild flowers peculiar to his own neighborhood,” about which he could have taught Linnaeus a thing or two. He was similarly impatient with the abstractions of English grammar; he wrote as he spoke, picking up style from his reading, and knew he was perfectly intelligible. Earlier editors stigmatized as “incorrect” what were in fact dialect vocabulary

and usages. The difficulty of these can be overplayed; the glossary in Bate’s selection of poems occupies only two and a half pages, and one quickly becomes accustomed to Clare’s favorite words.

Clare’s father, Parker Clare, was a casual laborer, and the boy’s schooling was casual too, fitted in when he was not required for agricultural work. At his second school he met Mary Joyce, who became a symbol of idealized love for him. Throughout his life Clare was obsessed with Mary, devoting dozens of poems to her, coming to believe she was his wife, and refusing to accept that she had died, unmarried, in 1838 at the age of forty-one. When his desultory formal education ended, Clare drifted through a succession of jobs, ploughing, working in the pub next door to his house, keeping horses, gardening, and working on the nearby Burghley estate, owned by the Marquess of Exeter. For a time he served in the militia, but never saw active service. Eventually, aged twenty-five, he left Helpston and worked as a lime-burner in the Stamford area, where he met Martha Turner, who became his wife.

So far his story could be that of thousands of early nineteenth-century working men. What sets Clare apart is his literary self-education. Prose counted for little in this; most of the great English novels simply passed him by. The ballads of oral tradition such as his father and the neighbors sang, the literary ballads of Burns, the meditative poetry of Cowper, Thomson’s *The Seasons*, and Milton’s *Par* *Paradise Lost* were his early loves. He saved money to buy books, which he hid from his parents in a locked chest. The works just mentioned transmitted a mixed influence, part Latinate elegance and part plain, homely diction; Clare eventually shed the former and stuck to the English he knew best. Like many another teenager he scribbled poems in his spare time, writing with a pencil on the crown of his hat in the fields; pretending they were the works of others, he tried them out on his parents, who commented, “Aye, boy, if you could write so, you would do.” It was a particular pleasure to him that Parker Clare lived to see his son’s work in print.

The turning-point in his fortunes came through the Stamford bookseller Edward Drury. “Peasant poetry” was fashionable; the laborer Robert Bloomfield had made a sensation with *The Farmer’s Boy* (1800). Clare spent a week’s wages on a handsome blank-paper book and began copying his poems into it. With some local encouragement he issued a proposal to print his poems by subscription, but this fell through. Then Drury took up Clare’s cause and showed some poems to his cousin, John Taylor of Taylor and Hessey in London, the publishers of Keats’s *Endymion*. Taylor was enthusiastic, and *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* appeared in 1820, reprinting three times within the year.

There has been much controversy about Taylor’s role. Eric Robinson maintains that he distorted Clare’s work by his editorial interventions, alterations, and corrections, in effect destroying its authenticity to make it conform with metropolitan notions of polite literature and stylistic decorum. Building upon the ground-breaking work of Zachary Leader in*Revision and Romantic Authorship* (Oxford, 1996), Bate largely acquits Taylor of these charges, showing that Clare frequently solicited such help and was grateful for it, recognizing that in publishing his poetry he had to have an eye to attracting readers and that some modifications of his own usage would be necessary. Taylor was flexible; Bate quotes his tribute that Clare spoke “the unwritten language of England” and his comment in a letter, “Your Education has better fitted you for a Poet than all School Learning in the World was able to do.”

Not that all Taylor’s work was helpful, or that Clare was necessarily better off for being brought before the world. He was caught between conflicting expectations; his local patrons were aristocrats who expected to censor the poems for radical phrases and looked down their noses at publishers as mere tradesmen, whereas Taylor was a middle-class Nonconformist with a grasp of the practical realities of marketing at a time when the public appetite for poetry was beginning to wane. He realized that Clare’s rustic forthrightness and clumsiness were essential parts of his appeal, but to make him commercially profitable he had to be “civilized” to some extent. Their relationship was

stormy. There were incessant squabbles over advance payments and royalties, although, as Bate points out, "The accounts were a mess not because Taylor was trying to dupe Clare but because all Taylor and Hessey's finances were a mess." The delay between volumes, however, grew longer; Clare's second collection, *The Village Minstrel*, appeared in 1821, a year after his first, but then his best known book, *The Shepherd's Calendar*, had to wait until 1827, its text being heavily edited by Taylor. It makes a striking contrast with the poems of the same name by the Elizabethan Edmund Spenser, whose pastoral conceits are replaced by examples of what Bate neatly terms "the art of noticing." In "March," for instance:

> While, far above, the solitary crane
> Swings lonely to unfrozen dykes again,
> Cranking a jarring melancholy cry
> Through the wild journey of the cheerless sky.

The tinny sound-effects, brittle in the cold, and the rhythmic mimicry of the slow flapping of the bird's wings, are impeccably done.

Clare visited London four times in the 1820s, meeting Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt, and De Quincey. He was particularly appreciative of the quality of their talk, so different from what he was accustomed to or, indeed, from what he could produce himself, with his unpolished manner and lack of classically trained fluency. He was not dazzled, however, shrewdly noting how Coleridge's words "hung in their places at a quiet pace from a drawl in good set marching order" as if rehearsed, and how the neurotic Hazlitt entered a room "with his eyes in his hands as if it were throwing under gazes round at every corner." Although he never met Keats, he responded to his work with shrewd appreciation, while dubious about his "constant allusion or illusion to the Grecian Mythology" and his lack of first-hand acquaintance with the natural world. (Conversely, Taylor reported Keats's feeling that Clare's "Images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular Sentiment.") In 1824 Clare happened upon the funeral procession of Byron, and was impressed by the contrast between the detachment of "the quality" watching from adjacent houses, and the sorrow of the common people in the crowd: "They are the veins and arteries that feed and quicken the heart of living fame." Later, in his madness, he would identify himself with Byron. There are more similarities than might at first appear, as Bate points out: the hatred of cant, the depressive streak, the promiscuity, the taste for satire, all link the lord and the laborer.

Bate's account of Clare's mental decline is one of the finest achievements in his biography. To simplify a complex sequence of events: Clare first experienced severe depression in the mid-1820s and the early 1830s, which was not helped by his having moved from Helpston to Northborough, a distance of only a few miles which nonetheless made him feel bereft. The loss is expressed with agonizing vividness in "On Leaving the Cottage of my Birth":

> I miss the heath, its yellow furze,
> Molehills and rabbit tracks that lead
> Through besom-ling and teasel burrs
> That spread a wilderness indeed,
> The woodland oaks and all below
> That their white-powdered branches shield,
> The mossy paths—the very crow
> Croaked music in my native field.

In 1837, increasingly severe spells of depression and aberrant behavior led to Clare's confinement in High Beach Asylum in Epping Forest, north east of London, where he remained for four years under

the liberal regime of Matthew Allen. Jane Carlyle, after a visit, tartly described the place as one "to which any sane person would be delighted to be admitted." Tennyson spent some time there during Clare's period of residence, although there is no evidence that they met. It was at High Beach that Clare identified so closely with Byron that he wrote some "extra" stanzas of *Don Juan*, catching Byron's tone if not his technical adroitness; scatological and satirical by turns, contemptuous of Parliament and the Royal Family, they exhibit unnerving moments of conscious self-laceration:

> Lord Byron, poh—the man wot writes the werses
> And is just what he is and nothing more,
> Who with his pen lies like the mist disperses
> And makes all nothing as it was before,
> Who wed two wives and oft the truth rehearses
> And might have had some twenty thousand more,
> Who has been dead, so fools their lies are giving,
> And still in Allen's madhouse caged and living.

In 1841 Clare absconded from the asylum and walked the eighty miles back to North- borough, keeping a remarkable journal of his experiences which Bate usefully includes in his selection of poems. At the end of that year he was taken to another asylum at Northampton, where he remained until his death. During much of this time he continued to write, producing some shapeless and incoherent work but also, in lucid intervals, some of his finest poetry. This was preserved thanks to an asylum worker, William Knight, who recognized its quality and transcribed it, grappling, like Taylor before him, with Clare's unpunctuated and semi-legible handwriting.

Bate stresses that "It would be a mistake to suppose that there was just one thing wrong" with Clare, or that "his problems had a single cause." On the surviving evidence he "is most unlikely to have been a schizophrenic," a more probable diagnosis being "manic depression or 'bipolar affective disorder'" for which a modern doctor would prescribe Prozac or Lithium. "It is worth wondering," Bate adds trenchantly, "whether such a prescription would have saved him from the asylum at the cost of killing his poetic muse"; still more disturbingly, "He may have become psychotic because he was surrounded by psychosis." He was better cared for at Northampton, at all events, than at home; there is no evidence that his wife, who outlived him, visited him in the asylum once in the twenty-three years he was there. The asylum, "much the grandest building that Clare ever lived in," and where, much later, James Joyce's daughter Lucia died, was run on principles remarkably enlightened for the time. Provided he was not violent, Clare was free to treat it as a home, to walk about the grounds, and to write. "Free," however, is a comparative term; psychological enclosure hemmed him in still, as he complained in a voice sometimes very like that of Blake:

> In every language upon earth,
> On every shore, o'er every sea,
> I gave my name immortal birth
> And kept my spirit with the free.

The two poems entitled "Lines: 'I Am'" and "Sonnet: 'I Am'" contain some of Clare's most familiar lines: "I am the self-consumer of my woes," the tumult of "the nothingness of scorn and noise," "the living sea of waking dreams," and this passage, recalling Hamlet on being the king of infinite space:

> I was a being created in the race
> Of men disdaining bounds of place and time—
> A spirit that could travel o'er the space

> Of earth and heaven like a thought sublime,
> Tracing creation, like my maker, free—
> A soul unshackled—like eternity,
> Spurning earth's vain and soul-debasing thrall.
> But now I only know I am—that's all.

This is often compared to the Emily Brontë variety of Romanticism, but it is the opposite of that, not proud self-assertion but desperate frustration with the limitations of physical existence. Bate brilliantly sees that Clare, "the poet of circular motions," had a strong streak of Platonism in him, which made his longing for childhood innocence and the oblivion of the grave dual aspects of the same imaginative impulse.

The letters Clare wrote to his son from Northampton are heart-breaking, often consisting simply of the names of people he remembers at Helpston. He also made lists of girls' names, which Bate reports have been compared by a feminist, Lynne Pearce, to the productions of a "sex-murderer." Lynne Pearce ought to be ashamed of herself. Bate is surely right to feel that the lists are Clare's attempt to "hold on to his past, his identity." He could only do this by writing, and as his control of his writing failed, so his despondency increased. Scraps of his conversation, recorded by visitors, tell the same story. "Why," he told one young lady in 1860, "they have cut off my head and picked out all the letters in the alphabet—all the vowels and all the consonants and brought them out through my ears—and then they want me to write poetry! I can't do it." Yet only a few months earlier he had addressed himself—"Well, honest John, how fare you now at home?"—and lingered lovingly over remembered scenes: birds building their nests, the cockerel strutting with the hens, the pigs asleep in the sty, the little boys cramming marbles back into their pockets as they read about Jack the Giant-killer. There was not much more to come, however. The giants won. Clare fell silent, poetically and personally, except for bouts of colorful profanity. On May 20, 1864, crippled by several strokes, he died quietly in his bed, having lived "twice the age of Burns and four times that of Chatterton." "I have lived too long. I want to go home," he had frequently said in the last stages of his long decline.

Clare does not lend himself well to close analytical criticism. He made few formal innovations, being content with traditional, hymn-like metres, rhyming couplets, or sonnets—though Bate does note his sometimes putting the couplet at the start of the sonnet rather than at the end. He works by accumulation rather than compression, which makes him hard to quote in excerpts, though he can achieve haunting individual lines, such as "The present is the funeral of the past." The reader needs patience, for the quality of Clare's output is variable, its beauties easy to overlook, its lyric strain self-communing rather than self-advertising. In a sonnet addressed to the Dutch water-color painter Peter de Wint, Clare praises the artist's abstention from "painted freaks" and "wild romantic sky" in favor of "spots … Where common skill sees nothing deemed divine":

> thy young pencil worked such rich surprise
> That rushy flats befringed with willow tree
> Rivalled the beauties of Italian skies.

Bate justly makes the comparison to Clare himself. He is a poet to be read slowly and mulled over, an elegist without sentimentality and an authentic spokesman for a vanished world.

In his last two chapters, Bate surveys Clare's country today and estimates his poetic legacy. There is still an annual Clare Festival in Helpston; the poet's cottage is now occupied by the wonderfully named Mrs. Robin Goodfellow; Crossberry Way has become an up-market housing estate called Marymede, after Clare's first love (not in fact a Helpston girl); the spot once occupied by Clare's

orchard now boasts "a gift shop specialising in teddy bears." Thus we go about the business of our "Heritage industry," oblivious to the real heritage which lies all around us. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Clare attracted the sympathetic attention of a few enthusiasts, among them Arthur Symons, Edward Thomas, Edmund Blunden, John and Anne Tibble, Geoffrey Grigson, and James Reeves, all of whom published selections—Reeves's with a perceptive introduction ("There never was a more helpless and more completely possessed victim of poetry"). Poets, rather than critics, kept Clare alive; Leavis, Empson, Eliot, Cleanth Brooks, all passed him by. Theodore Roethke, himself driven by demons, and, more startlingly, John Ashbery, have paid their tributes.

Eric Robinson, to whom we owe the monumental Oxford edition, which exactly reproduces the manuscripts, has claimed, controversially, to own exclusive copyright in all Clare's published and unpublished works, and has shown himself willing to defend this claim in the courts. That Bate has been able to acknowledge Robinson's support is a great tribute to his powers of persuasion. Robinson's edition is irreplaceable, albeit ruinously expensive (Clare could never have afforded it), but Bate's selection and biography do honor to himself, to Clare, and to poetry.

Notes

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1. *"I Am": The Selected Poetry of John Clare*, edited by Jonathan Bate; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 310 pages, $14 (paper). *John*
John Clare: A Biography, by Jonathan Bate; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 637 pages, $35. Go back to the text.

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This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 22 December 2003, on page 93

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