Introduction: Clare and community

On 19 March 1826, writing to the literary editor Alaric Watts, John Clare responded to what was evidently an offer to choose a gift of books. He did so with the flirtatious delicacy of a man who has played this game before and knows its protocols and pitfalls:

> I can hardly have the face to state as you desire me what books I like as I do not wish to intrude on the kindness of any one or else I have long desired to see the Poems of 'Miss Landon' which I have not been able to do as yet Montgomerys too are strangers to me excepting some things in periodicals which only made me desire to become acquainted with the rest the reading of no poem ever left such an impression on my fondness for poetry as his 'Common Lot' did which I met with about 10 years ago in a little volume called the 'Beautys of Poetry'.[1]

This careful negotiation offers us a glimpse of the frustration Clare may have felt at only being able to nibble at the work of popular contemporaries like 'L.E.L.' ('Miss Landon') and James Montgomery, through the stray newspaper publications and anthologies that came his way. It also opens critical vistas into the possible richness for Clare of even these limited resources, and the excitement he experiences when he finds something interesting among them.

The 'little volume' he had 'met with 10 years ago' was *The Parnassian Garland, Or, Beauties of Modern Poetry, from the Works of the Most Distinguished Poets of the Present Age* (London, 1807, no. 328 in the Powell catalogue of Clare's library), edited by John Evans, LL.D., and 'Designed for the Use of Schools and the Admirers of Poetry in general'. It may be 'little' but it is also a surprisingly compendious anthology of short, often sententious poems, and would have enabled Clare to sample virtually all his most prominent contemporaries and some of his forbears, including the labouring-class poets Thomas Dermody, Ann Yearsley, and Robert and Nathaniel Bloomfield. Two poems each by Charlotte Smith and S. T. Coleridge are interleaved with each other, one of several Yearsley poems sits between Robert Southey and W. L. Bowles, and indeed the sense one

gets of this evidently popular sourcebook, at least from this distance, is of a levelled and democratic literary landscape.

Appropriately, then, the poem that sticks in Clare's memory from the anthology, Montgomery's 'The Common Lot', begins as follows:

> ONCE in the flight of ages past
> There liv'd a Man—and *who* was He?
> Mortal! howe'er thy lot be cast,
> That Man resembl'd thee!
>
> Unknown the region of his birth,
> The land in which he died unknown;
> His name hath perish'd from the Earth,
> This truth survives alone—
>
> That joy, and grief, and hope, and fear,
> Alternate triumph'd in his breast;
> His bliss and woe, a smile, a tear!
> Oblivion hides the rest. (ll. 1–12)[2]

Montgomery is reprising a theme familiar from Thomas Gray's *Elegy in a Country Churchyard*, but instead of following Gray to make the anonymous soul's posthumous obscurity a matter for poignant or consolatory piety, he develops a more triumphalist consolation, in the idea of a humanity of common feeling, and in the universal significance of the unostentatious, anonymous subject whose memory may ultimately endure and prove more resistant than mere individualism.

It should not surprise us that this caught Clare's eye, since as a writer he in many ways shares this ideal of commonality as against individualistic values. For example, he foreshadows Virginia Woolf's feminist resistance to the power of the first-person pronoun 'I', the 'dark bar' across the page, as she calls it, which for Woolf mars the work of the modern male fiction writer.[3] Writing to his friend Eliza Emmerson in March 1830 about grammar and gossip, Clare personifies the first-person pronoun as a 'presumption ambitious swaggering little fellow':

> Had I not recieved your letter to remind me of my errors I should not have been with you in the shape of a letter untill the day after tomorrow for I was indulging in the gossip you desired of me & wishing to make it more commendable by variety I determined to speak in parables & that in past moods & tenses for I am growing out of myself into many existences & wish to become more entertaining in other genders for that little personal pronoun 'I' is such a presumption ambitious swaggering little fellow that he thinks himself qualified for all company all places & all employments go where you will there he is swaggering & bouncing in the pulpit the parliment the bench aye every where even in

this my letter he has intruded 5 several times already … he is a sort of Deity over the rest of the alphabet being here there & everywhere <at one & the same time> he is a mighty vapour in grammar (*Letters*, 504)

Clare's rodomontade on the 'swaggering little fellow' fills the whole letter. The self-confident 'I' of the first-person pronoun is for Clare, as it is for Woolf, a denizen of a male establishment ('the pulpit the parliment the bench') from which the writer is careful to distance himself/herself, wishing to become 'more entertaining in other genders', and 'growing out of myself into many existences'. Those familiar with Clare's life story may find this last aspiration troubling, since seven years after he wrote it he would find himself in a long-term residential institution suffering from a condition which appears to have involved multiple subjective identities among other 'mad' behaviours. Conversely, as I argue in the first chapter, some of Clare's more cryptic statements from the later asylum period might well be read as exercises in resisting the burden of individualism, at least in authorship: 'I'm John Clare now. I was Byron and Shakespeare formerly. At different times you know I'm different people—that is the same person with different names.'[4] This could be seen as a survival technique *in extremis*. It certainly follows a lifelong pattern of questioning and resisting the idea of fixed personal identity, and a healthy suspicion of those who most loudly and publicly assert themselves.

This mental habit informs the two linked topics in Clare that I wish to discuss in the present study, which are his literary engagements with contemporary and earlier poets, and his representation of his community's culture and ecology in transition and crisis: two areas within the theme of community. Clare's relations with the poets of the past and present show that while he greatly values many individual voices, he values even more the idea of a writerly community from which he can draw sustenance and inspiration, and to which he can himself contribute. Furthermore, in representing his village community as it buckles under the immense pressure of the enclosure crisis (discussed in Chapter 5), Clare drew heavily on sociable and popular modes of writing as well as on his community of poets, showing us in doing so a cultural ecology that had survived through the enactment of customary rituals and activities, and through its own cooperative sense of community.[5]

The 'sociable' Clare of these two topics needs to be stressed, and further critically examined, partly because there is another, quite different John Clare. He is well captured in the pun *The Guardian* newspaper used as heading for an article I wrote about the Clare copyright dispute

some years ago: 'Poor Clare'.[6] This Clare, of whom I have often written myself – for example, with Kelsey Thornton in our essay 'John Clare: The Trespasser' (1994) – is a more individualistic, unsocialised and even antisocial figure, a member of what he himself would call 'the awkward squad', literally meaning a soldier marching out of step;[7] an isolated outsider, vulnerable to the whims of the powerful, and transgressive by necessity if not always by choice. This figure of 'poor Clare' is a mumbling loner, suspected by his community of madness or worse, and reciprocally suspicious of humanity in general; at bay in his middle years, latterly sometimes bitterly misanthropic or rancidly misogynistic; always fond of tobacco and drinking, and having a habit in his cups, as Roger Sales wryly observes, of growing 'abusive and radical just before he slid under a table'.[8] 'Poor Clare' is understood to be a victim from the earliest accounts, such as those of some of the asylum visitors and the Frederick Martin biography of 1865. Martin himself was an outsider in London literary life and his affecting though for aught we know entirely imaginary account of Clare being dragged, weeping, from the bosom of his family in the dying days of 1841 and 'thrust into the gaol for the insane' for what the biographer furiously calls the 'new crime' of 'having written poetry', helped to establish a paradigm of Clare as a martyr and a rebel, the ultimate victimised literary outsider.[9] For many of Clare's readers and admirers the poet retains the glamour of his outsider status, and in some ways he continues to resist easy absorption into the tourist, leisure, ecological, educational and literary critical industries that have recently begun to lay serious claim to his legacy. In particular, literary representations of Clare such as those in two recent novels, Adam Foulds's *The Quickening Maze* (2009) and Judith Allnatt's *The Poet's Wife* (2010), emphasise the isolated 'poor Clare' image, though Hugh Lupton's *The Ballad of John Clare* (2010) interestingly complicates the model of sociable versus loner Clare by showing Clare's sense of kinship with the gypsies, themselves an 'outsider' grouping. Perhaps Lupton's own experiences as a practitioner of sociable storytelling, new to the more isolated habits of novel-writing, have made him more alert to the social side of things than other artists who have been drawn to 'poor Clare'.[10]

But while the potency of this loner/victim model of Clare cannot easily be denied, the 'poor Clare' model may itself fairly be argued to be limiting and disempowering to the poet and his reputation. It has understandably been challenged by scholars such as Alan Vardy, in his 2003 study of Clare and politics. Vardy, however, keeps up a familiar attack on Clare's publisher John Taylor for his treatment of the poet, an attack that is

typically part of the 'poor Clare' model.[11] Other scholars, such as Zachary Leader, have emphasised the collegial nature of Clare's literary production, a vital sociability that the 'poor Clare' model of Romantic isolation has tended to occlude.[12] Taylor, routinely villainised in earlier critical and biographical work as evidence of Clare's vulnerability to the whims of the powerful, has undergone a remarkable rehabilitation in recent scholarship.[13] Even Clare's patrons are getting a better press of late, notably in Emma Trehane's revisionist work of discovering a less dismissively sexist, more sympathetic view of a key figure, Eliza Emmerson.[14] What begins to emerge from this body of work is the insight that Clare's poetry was by no means all produced in solitude or oppressive misery, and that his literary 'communities' – albeit some of them imaginary – both contributed to and sustained his creativity far more than the isolationist view supposes. And although these ideas clearly follow similar changes in the general perception of Romanticism in recent decades, a 'sociable' model of Clare scholarship may actually be traced back as far as the 'poor Clare' tradition. The 'communitarian' Clare, to borrow a term from Anne Janowitz's study of Romantic poetry,[15] was actively engaged in several overlapping and corresponding literary circles from his earliest years as a poet, among them his local backers Drury and Gilchrist, and his friends the Milton Hall scholar-servants Henderson and Artis, the *London Magazine* circle, and (sharing the interest of several 'Londoners' in the topic), the community of poets Clare imagines as embracing the seventeenth century author Isaac Walton.[16] They include London friends, patrons and publishers such as Eliza Emmerson, John Taylor and James Hessey,[17] and others such as Taylor's servant Thomas Bennion;[18] and networks of other poets, publishers and journal editors, and friends and correspondents throughout East Anglia and beyond, to Nottingham, Sheffield, and even as far as Glasgow.[19] In the earlier asylum period they include the former friend of Bloomfield, Thomas Inskip, and the asylum attendant W. F. Knight, with whom Inskip corresponded.

If the 'poor Clare' model has tended to appeal to individualistic and maverick Clareans such as Frederick Martin or Edmund Blunden (who took Arthur Symons's edition of Clare's poems to the trenches of the Western Front), as well as to a sizeable modern readership identifying with Clare's struggles over self-education, class and mental health issues,[20] then the socialised Clare may also claim an honourable posthumous lineage through the long tradition of sociable celebrations of the poet. This encompasses the 1893, 1964 and 1993 anniversary activities, Clare celebrations as part of Helpston village galas and, since 1981, the John Clare

Society's annual John Clare Festival, held in the village on or near his birthday each July, with its attendant 'midsummer cushion' ceremony in which local children write poems, sing songs and place dressed turfs of flowers on Clare's grave, reviving a village custom Clare himself had memorialised in the proposed title of his last collection, *The Midsummer Cushion*.[21] In the new millennium, the embracing of Clare as 'the people's poet' in the broadsheet press and by ecologists, academics and representatives of the political and literary establishment is also itself a kind of tribute to his capacity to represent a communitarian tradition.[22]

Clearly then, both these Clares or these aspects of Clare are important to keep in mind in critical work that aspires to reflect adequately the richness of his poetry, and while I focus centrally in the present study on the 'sociable' Clare, the 'loner' Clare is never far away. Indeed, he will be sighted at almost every turn, from his choice of literary heroes like Chatterton (Chapter 1), a profoundly isolated and tragic figure, to the baited badger, at bay in his famous sonnet sequence (Chapter 5), and the sorrowful young woman who sits silently in the middle of one of Clare's most exuberant descriptions of communal festive celebration. Clare sympathetically identifies with 'once beguiled Kate' (Chapter 7), as he does with other 'undone' or tragic female victims in his narrative poems, from 'The Fate of Amy' to 'The Sorrows of Love' (Chapter 8), perhaps glimpsing in them some shadow of his lost twin sister, Bessy, who died in early infancy.[23]

As I have suggested, the 'sociable' Clare has been much in evidence in recent critical work, and this is a welcome development, not only in terms of properly contextualising the way he represents his community and its culture, but also in understanding both the poetry's folk and its literary contexts. They are closely linked, but the literary context in particular has been under-represented both in editorial annotation of Clare and in critical exegesis, and although the most recent studies have made significant moves towards mending this situation, there is still often some sense of disapproval about Clare's stylistic debts, particularly to those William St Clair has termed the poets of the 'old canon'. My chapter on Clare's bold, unashamed and often affectionate intertextual relationship with eighteenth-century poetry will, I hope, contribute to a more appreciative sense of his (profoundly sociable) refusal to accept the barriers society increasingly raised between 'high' and 'low' cultural production.

The present study aims to contribute to Clare studies, then, by mapping out the general sense of Clare's sociability within the two big topics it addresses, through detailed work on specific examples of intertextually

significant or representative poets, and of community representations. Keeping 'loner' Clare in view throughout this 'sociable' work helps to offer a more accurate if less smoothly rounded picture, and perhaps to explain the 'strangeness' and 'awkwardness' that many readers have noted and some have enjoyed in Clare's writing.[24] Like Bloomfield before him (Chapter 4) this was a poet whose vision of the English rural community came fully freighted with an intimate knowledge of the harshness, coldness, poverty and loneliness of rural life, heightened as they were by the social and psychic upheavals of enclosure, and the stormy political weather of the post-French Revolutionary period.[25] I also want to demonstrate some of the ways in which these two communities (writerly and rural) relate to one another. They tend to be seen in tension almost by definition: 'refined' versus 'rural'. But these oppositions are not by any means hard and fast ones, and Clare is often at his most interesting when we see him, not just negotiating between the two communities, but finding the places where they overlap and creatively converge, where he can make his poetry heal the breach between the 'real' and the 'literary' village.

To keep things within reasonable bounds while offering a level of detailed discussion adequate to these general aims, I have had to be very selective. In the first part of the study I discuss in substantial detail three of Clare's 'touchstone' poets, with a round-up of some of the others. In the second part I cover four generic and thematic areas: two familiar topics in Clare studies (the enclosure elegies and the birds' nest poems), and some less-discussed festive and narrative materials. As with other areas covered, there is a great deal more poetry than I am able to address, so I have selected a particular strand of the narrative material that follows on from the isolated figure of 'poor Kate' in the chapter on festive celebration: tales of sexual betrayal, told by older female narrators.

This is all intended to contribute to a much larger process of critical rediscovery, which others will pursue further, as regards both Clare and the poets, and the way in which Clare represents his community and its stories. On the poets, for instance, many more comparative studies between Clare and other writers are needed.[26] To touch on an obvious example, a poet of Clare's stature who by the age of thirty had read the 'soul thrilling' tragedy of *Macbeth* 'about twenty times', and had 'always been very fond from almost a boy' of *Henry the Fifth* – despite finding the 'welch officer with two other of his companions' to be 'tedious talkers' – cries out for a full comparative study with Shakespeare, of the kind his contemporary Keats has several times received.[27] One suspects that the common view of Clare as an artless or folk-derived poet may have

contributed to the sparseness of such critical work. But these gaps need filling, and this study may suggest some possible routes and methods to adopt in this process.

Clare's poetry is a rich critical feast, and I offer some reasons for my particular selections from it and its contexts along the way, as and when it seems appropriate to do so. Although the study begins and ends (briefly) with some references to 'late Clare', most of the poems and prose extracts discussed are from the very early writings through to the middle period of his writing career, reflecting the more sociable side of Clare's work evident in this broad period. I hope to offer more substantial critical fare on the later, asylum period in a future study, which will focus on the 'awkward', resistant side of the poet's writings.

I shall conclude this introduction by saying something about my own position as a critic. I began reading Clare as a mature student about thirty years ago, encouraged by a friend and fellow student, Mick Kitson, and by my late father, Frank Goodridge, who greatly admired the poet. I read as a curious reader rather than as a scholar: my subsequent doctoral research concerned an earlier period in poetry, albeit with similar themes. While I have since developed a more rigorous critical approach to Clare, I have retained the enthusiast's habit of allowing myself to follow whatever lines of enquiry – and lines of poetry – caught my attention. This is arguably within the spirit of Clare's own creative love of 'careless' (i.e. untroubled, adventurous) wanderings through the landscape, and is certainly true to the pleasure principle that has been so important in sustaining his widening readership over two centuries, and Clare's unofficial role as the best-loved English poet of natural history and the rural world. Ultimately, we read Clare for pleasure; and though there are few authors from whom, in our ecologically challenged times, we can learn more usefully, attempts to impose too prescriptive or systematic a critical structure on his work tend to be ineffective.[28] The variety and intellectual omnivorousness evident throughout Clare's writings demand a matching flexibility and openness in his critics. I have attempted to meet this through a free range of critical approaches, including formalistic, psycho-biographical, social-historical and 'close reading' techniques. I should not have been able to do so, it needs to be said, without the heroic efforts of Clare's modern editors, the 'nine lives' of his biographers (as Greg Crossan once called them), and the invaluable critical work of the many other scholars whose shoulders I stand on, and whose labours I should like warmly to acknowledge here.

PART I

Brother bards and fellow labourers