JOHN CLARE AND COMMUNITY

John Clare (1793–1864) is one of the most sensitive poetic observers of the natural world. Born into a rural labouring family, he felt connected to two communities: his native village and the Romantic and earlier poets who inspired him. The first part of this study of Clare and community shows how Clare absorbed and responded to his reading of a selection of poets including Chatterton, Bloomfield, Gray and Keats, revealing just how serious the process of self-education was to his development. The second part shows how he combined this reading with the oral folk-culture he was steeped in, to create an unrivalled poetic record of a rural culture during the period of enclosure, and the painful transition to the modern world. In his lifelong engagement with rural and literary life, Clare understood the limitations as well as the strengths in communities, the pleasures as well as the horrors of isolation.

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This series aims to foster the best new work in one of the most challenging fields within English literary studies. From the early 1780s to the early 1830s a formidable array of talented men and women took to literary composition, not just in poetry, which some of them famously transformed, but in many modes of writing. The expansion of publishing created new opportunities for writers, and the political stakes of what they wrote were raised again by what Wordsworth called those ‘great national events’ that were ‘almost daily taking place’: the French Revolution, the Napoleonic and American wars, urbanisation, industrialisation, religious revival, an expanded empire abroad and the reform movement at home. This was an enormous ambition, even when it pretended otherwise. The relations between science, philosophy, religion and literature were reworked in texts such as Frankenstein and Biographia Literaria; gender relations in A Vindication of the Rights of Woman and Don Juan; journalism by Cobbett and Hazlitt; poetic form, content and style by the Lake School and the Cockney School. Outside Shakespeare studies, probably no body of writing has produced such a wealth of comment or done so much to shape the responses of modern criticism. This indeed is the period that saw the emergence of those notions of ‘literature’ and of literary history, especially national literary history, on which modern scholarship in English has been founded.

The categories produced by Romanticism have also been challenged by recent historicist arguments. The task of the series is to engage both with a challenging corpus of Romantic writings and with the changing field of criticism they have helped to shape. As with other literary series published by Cambridge, this one will represent the work of both younger and more established scholars, on either side of the Atlantic and elsewhere.

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JOHN CLARE AND COMMUNITY

JOHN GOODRIDGE

Nottingham Trent University
for Simon Kövesi

who put things right
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This book considers some of the ways in which John Clare perceived and represented two communities, that of his native village, whose culture, ecology and natural environment it was his life’s principal work to record in poetry, and the community of poets who inspired him and gave him many of the resources needed to do the job. It shows how these two communities are intimately linked in his poetry: how, for example, the death of Ophelia in Hamlet might enrich Clare’s portrayal of an old woman’s storytelling (Chapter 8) or – to stay with the same text for a moment, since Shakespeare was one of Clare’s favourite authors – how a remembrance of Osric’s absurd bonnet from the same play could give a comic edge to the description of lapwing chicks emerging from their nest (Chapter 6).

Labouring-class poets like Clare are often described as ‘self-taught’, as in the sub-title of Brian Maidment’s pioneering anthology The Poorhouse Fugitives: Self-taught Poets and Poetry in Victorian Britain (1987), and they have in the past been termed ‘uneducated’, as in Robert Southey’s Lives of the Uneducated Poets (1832). The two conditions ought not to be confused, although they often are. In this study, the way Clare reads poets like Chatterton, Gray, Keats and Bloomfield shows just how intense and vital was the process of self-education, how very far he was from being ‘uneducated’. The first part of the book is concerned with the ways Clare absorbed and responded to his reading of other poets; the second part shows how he combined this reading with materials from the oral folk-culture he was steeped in, to create an unrivalled poetic record of rural culture during the period of enclosure and agricultural intensification, during the painful transition to the modern world.

Clare was capable of being both an intensely sociable and a deeply enigmatic, shy man, and his sense of ‘community’ was ambivalent: he
understood the difficulties as well as the strengths inherent in communities, the pleasure as well as the horrors of isolation. He could invert Gray's famous phrase about the flower ‘born to blush unseen’ into a triumphant image of a flower that sociably ‘Perks up’ among the grass, contrarily ‘wishing to be seen’ (Early Poems, 11, 62), but he could also write, in all seriousness, ‘I hate the very noise of troublous man / Who did & does me all the harm he can’ (Middle Period, v, 248). This study thus acknowledges and incorporates in its discussion of Clare’s sense of community much that is ambivalent or hostile to communitarian values, offering a more rounded sense of the poetry of a man who once felt himself complexly ‘homeless at home’ (By Himself, 264).

I am immensely grateful to all those who have encouraged and discussed Clare with me over the years, including all my friends in the John Clare Society, the Robert Bloomfield Society, the Thomas Chatterton Society, the ‘Elsie’ group of scholars working on labouring-class poetry, the Clare Forum and the Raymond Williams Centre for Recovery Research at Nottingham Trent University, and present and former students and colleagues at Nottingham Trent and at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, my alma mater. I have benefitted from the wisdom and generosity of many individuals in the Clare community, including Carry Akroyd, Jonathan Bate, Paul Chirico, Tim Chilcott, Bill Christmas, Peter Cox, Greg Crossan, Mina Gorji, Hugh Haughton, Andy Jurgis, Kaye Kossick, Simon Kövesi, Rodney Lines, John Lucas, Phil Martin, Scott McEathron, Jim McKusick, Peter Moyse, Val Pedlar, David Powell, Roger Sales and Kelsey Thornton. I am also fortunate enough to have enjoyed the wisdom of the late Douglas Mack, Mary Moyse, Bill Ruddick and Keith Traynar, and the gentle encouragement of the late Geoffrey Summerfield.

Preface and acknowledgements

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Abbreviations and conventions

Bate


*By Himself*

*John Clare By Himself*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester, 1996).

Chatterton, *Works* (i–ii)


*Cottage Tales*


*Critical Heritage*


*Early Poems* (i–ii)


Eg.

British Library, Egerton Manuscript.

*Haughton*


*The Independent Spirit*


*JCSJ*


*Later Poems*


*Letters*


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Abbreviations and conventions


NMS  Northampton Manuscript, held at Northamptonshire Central Library.


OET  The Oxford English Texts edition of Clare (Early Poems, Middle Period, Later Poems).

PMS  Peterborough Manuscript, held at Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery.

Powell  [David Powell], *Catalogue of the John Clare Collection in the Northampton Public Library* (Northampton, 1964).


Books are cited within the text and in short form, where it is not intrusive to do so, by page number or line number (l.) as appropriate. Manuscripts are normally cited using folio (fo.) numbers. Within quotations, deleted material is indicated by angle brackets, editorial interpolations by square brackets. Letters are given in the form sender–recipient, date. Biblical citations are to the Authorised Version of the Bible; Shakespeare citations are to the *Complete Works* edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988).