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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.

JOHN GOODRIDGE is Professor of English at Nottingham Trent University.

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*for Simon Kövesi
who put things right*

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Preface and acknowledgements

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*, II, 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.

This study draws on and develops material published in *Angelaki*, *The Cowper and Newton Bulletin*, *Critical Survey*, *The Eighteenth Century: Theory and Interpretation*, *The John Clare Society Journal*, *Romanticism*, *The Keats-Shelley Review*, *The Wordsworth Circle*, and the essay collections *The Independent Spirit* (1994), *John Clare in Context* (1994), *Nineteenth-Century Literature Criticism*, 88 (2000), *John Clare: New Approaches* (2000), *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature 1730–1840* (2004), *Robert Bloomfield: Lyric, Class and the Romantic Canon* (2006) and *Poetry Criticism*, 80 (2008). I owe thanks to Tony Harrison for permission to quote from his poem 'A Kumquat for John Keats' as an epigraph to Chapter 3 (my ironic title quotation to Chapter 2 is also Harrisonian,

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from his sonnet 'On Not Being Milton'); to Molly Mahood for permission to quote in Chapter 8 from her forthcoming *John Clare Flora*, and for her sharp-eyed corrections to the manuscript; and to Carry Akroyd for very kindly allowing me to use her watercolour of Swaddywell Field for the cover image. Thanks are due to Kelsey Thornton and Bridget Keegan for kindly allowing me to draw on and develop materials from our jointly authored essays, 'John Clare: The Trespasser' (1994) with Kelsey and 'John Clare and the Traditions of Labouring-class Verse' (2004) with Bridget. I want to acknowledge Kelsey's contributions to what I have to say about 'The Mores' and about Clare as an outsider/trespasser figure, and Bridget's on Clare's role within the development of a labouring-class tradition in poetry, and to thank both for their friendly collaboration. I am grateful to Bob Heyes for generously sharing his transcripts of the unpublished letters to Clare, and to Emma Trehane for sharing her own discoveries in this field (see Chapter 3) and her unpublished database of books in Clare's library, which richly fills out David Powell's summary list. For help with the initial proposal and with other chapters my thanks are due to John Barrell, Helen Boden, Paul Dawson, David Fairer, Lynne Hapgood, Donna Landry, Sam Ward and Simon White; Sam Ward has also applied his considerable Clare scholarship to the index, which he has kindly compiled for me. Tim Fulford has been unsparing with his time, carefully reading much of the manuscript in various forms and offering many insightful and invaluable suggestions; Nick Groom, Juan Christian Pellicer and Bridget Keegan have made detailed comment on several chapters, which I have greatly appreciated. My former tutors at Newcastle, Claire Lamont and Bob White, both take an active interest in Clare studies and a generously supportive, mentorial pride in all my work, and very special thanks are overdue to both of them. Warm thanks are also due to Ronald Blythe for his encouragement and friendship over two decades. Gill Goodridge, who has been a member of the Clare Society as long as I have, has helped greatly with all aspects of the project and kindly read the finished manuscript, bringing her English-teacher's-red-pen out of retirement to correct many infelicities and errors (the remaining ones are mine). Margaret Goodridge kindly advised on spinning and knitting matters. Pete Goodridge and other members of my family, close friends and caregivers all helped me steer the project to completion. I particularly want to thank Lisa Clughen and Liz Goodridge, both of whom offered writing spaces at key moments, and Nottingham Trent University's English Research Committee for the

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Abbreviations and conventions

Bate	Jonathan Bate, <i>John Clare: A Biography</i> (London, 2003).
<i>By Himself</i>	<i>John Clare By Himself</i> , ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester, 1996).
Chatterton, <i>Works</i> (I–II)	<i>The Complete Works of Thomas Chatterton</i> , ed. Donald S. Taylor in association with Benjamin B. Hoover (Oxford, 1971).
<i>Cottage Tales</i>	John Clare, <i>Cottage Tales</i> , ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester, 1993).
<i>Critical Heritage</i>	<i>Clare: The Critical Heritage</i> , ed. Mark Storey (London, 1973).
<i>Early Poems</i> (I–II)	<i>The Early Poems of John Clare 1804–1822</i> , ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, assoc. ed. Margaret Grainger (Oxford, 1989).
Eg.	British Library, Egerton Manuscript.
Haughton	<i>John Clare in Context</i> , ed. Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips and Geoffrey Summerfield (Cambridge, 1994).
<i>The Independent Spirit</i>	<i>The Independent Spirit: John Clare and the Self-Taught Tradition</i> , ed. John Goodridge (Helpston, 1994).
JCSJ	<i>The John Clare Society Journal</i> , vols. 1–30 (1982–2011), continuing series.
<i>Later Poems</i>	<i>The Later Poems of John Clare 1837–1864</i> , ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, assoc. ed. Margaret Grainger (Oxford, 1984).
<i>Letters</i>	<i>The Letters of John Clare</i> , ed. Mark Storey (Oxford, 1985).

<i>Major Works</i>	<i>John Clare: Major Works</i> , ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell with an Introduction by Tom Paulin (Oxford, 2004).
<i>Middle Period</i> (I–V)	<i>John Clare, Poems of the Middle Period 1822–1837</i> , ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson (Oxford, volumes I–II 1996, volumes III–IV 1998, volume V 2003).
<i>Natural History</i>	<i>The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare</i> , ed. Margaret Grainger (Oxford, 1983).
<i>New Approaches</i>	<i>John Clare: New Approaches</i> , ed. John Goodridge and Simon Kövesi (Helpston, 2000).
NMS	Northampton Manuscript, held at Northamptonshire Central Library.
ODNB	<i>Oxford Dictionary of National Biography</i> , ed. Lawrence Goldman, online edition (Oxford, 2004, with later updates).
OED	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i> , ed. John Simpson, online edition (Oxford, 2000, with later updates).
OET	The Oxford English Texts edition of Clare (<i>Early Poems, Middle Period, Later Poems</i>).
PMS	Peterborough Manuscript, held at Peterborough Museum and Art Gallery.
Powell	[David Powell], <i>Catalogue of the John Clare Collection in the Northampton Public Library</i> (Northampton, 1964).
<i>Prose</i>	<i>The Prose of John Clare</i> , ed. J. W. and Anne Tibble (London, 1970).
Tibbles (1972)	J. W. and Anne Tibble, <i>John Clare A Life</i> (London, 1972).

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).