Introduction

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In his biography of Charles Dickens, John Forster quotes from a now lost letter which contains Dickens' only known reference to John Clare. It is not the kind of response we might have expected from a novelist so well regarded for sympathetic, nuanced portrayals of the effects and dimensions of poverty. Forster defends his subject:

> A dislike of display was rooted in [Dickens] . . . His aversion to every form of what is called patronage of literature was part of the same feeling . . . These views about patronage did not make him more indulgent to the clamour which with which it is so often invoked for the ridiculously small. 'You read that life of Clare?' he wrote (15th of August 1865). 'Did you ever see such preposterous exaggeration of small claims? And isn't it expressive, the perpetual prating of him in the book as *the Poet*? So another Incompetent used to write to the Literary Fund when I was on the committee: "This leaves the poet at his divine mission in a corner of a single room. The Poet's father is wiping his spectacles. The Poet's mother is weaving." – Yah!' He was equally intolerant of every magnificent proposal that should render the literary man independent of the bookseller, and he sharply criticized even a compromise to replace the half-profit system by one of royalties on copies sold.[1]

Dickens' scorn is really aimed at Frederick Martin's 1865 biography of the poet, the single most significant Victorian-period Clare publication.[2] Nevertheless, that Dickens should have been so sweepingly dismissive of Clare's 'small claims' while taking umbrage at the perceived excesses of a biographer he regards as a mere hagiographer comes as a disappointment. As with John Keats, Robert Bloomfield, William Wordsworth and Alfred Tennyson – all of whom Clare might readily have met in person but did not – Dickens' failure to appreciate Clare feels like yet another missed opportunity for a fruitful meeting of minds, albeit at a distance.[3] Yet his remarks can help us unpack a dominant problem in the history of Clare's critical reception. At the heart of the matter – as always in English life, it

seems – lies class; and for Clare in particular, class seems to render problematic almost every relationship he and his work might forge to the polite world of letters. By the time Dickens issued his sarcastic attack on Martin's extravagances, while swatting away, as one might an irritating midge, the very notion that Clare could be a writer of enduring interest, the eighteenth-century model of patronage had all but disappeared – with the hardest-working exemplar of the newly professionalized writer being Dickens himself. A *Times* editorial of 1964 memorably cut to the quick in explaining why excessive acclaim of Clare tended to come off as demeaning: 'Praise of his verses had about it a ring of the Johnsonian reaction to a dog walking on his hinder legs – it is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all.'[4]

Whereas the mid-Victorian Dickens could bid a blithe good riddance both to literary patronage and to those he felt had never deserved it, the Romantic era in which Clare was born, and into which his poetry first emerged in public, was a transitional period wherein a deferential, partisan mode of sponsored authorship was gradually replaced by one in which writers could independently exploit the newly capitalized economy of the book trade. Clare was both beneficiary and victim of this change. His income from a rather old-fashioned trust fund set up for him by a collaboration of publishers and patrons (of varying political hues) could theoretically have been substantial enough to cover his living expenses, yet in practice never quite did so. The publishing of collections of his own verse, and of individual poems in magazines, periodicals, annuals and anthologies, would seem to have augured financial health, but in fact did not appreciably boost his income. Any great expectations Clare had to be free of reliance on benefactors were persistently and repeatedly dashed; any monies he might have expected from his early successes never proved sufficient to stop feverish worries over the subsistence of his home and family. To his long-term correspondent and London helpmeet, the lonely middle-class Eliza Louisa Emmerson, Clare wrote in 1832: 'all I wish now is to stand upon my own bottom as a poet without any apology as to want of education or any thing else & I say it not in the feeling of either ambition or vanity but in the spirit of common sense'.[5] Commonsensical and reasonable such a wish may have been; realistic or realizable it was not.

In 1837 it was clear to Matthew Allen, the doctor who ran the asylum in Essex, that a root cause of Clare's psychological problems was that he simply did not eat enough.[6] As with many of his peers, it is likely that Clare was persistently malnourished. It is both no surprise and a sharp irony that

Clare never ate as well or as regularly as he did in the asylums in the final third of his life, so that by the time the only known photograph of Clare was taken in 1862 in Northampton, he looks healthily bulky.[7] But this stature was an accident of his being a private patient in both institutions – the fees for which were covered by his trust fund. No amount of effort of the 'historical imagination' can help us grasp what protracted hunger must have meant to Clare – to his body, his mind and so to his writing. For us this also stands as a critical problem, not least because he does not write about it much at all. There is always a fraught relationship between a critical subject-position of relative privilege (verging, some might say, on academic decadence) and a working-class object of study. This gulf of material experience can itself bring about the sort of over-praise that Dickens found so distasteful; indeed, the hagiography still informing some responses to Clare is no less a classist phenomenon than now-obsolete dismissals of his value. As Alan Porter observed as early as 1928,[8] neither Dickens nor the 1920s editor of the new edition of Forster's biography dealt fairly with Clare; but it remains true that Dickens's scorn could be redirected at many puff pieces in favour of Clare written in the century and a half since his death.

Hugh Haughton and Adam Phillips lamented in 1994 that Clare 'is mainly famous for being neglected',[9] neatly summarizing a predominant critical noise about Clare: that somehow the sort of misfortunes he suffered in life continue to beset his literary legacy due to a lingering snobbery and elitism towards his class and education; his rural, humble subject matter; and his language. Of course, those who locate their criticism solely in relationship to this neglect risk putting themselves in the dubiously heroic position of chastising others' class prejudices. Indeed, in twentieth-century reshapings of Clare's reputation it has sometimes been this protectionist posture, more than excessive praise, that has slowed the development of critical, creative and editorial work. But while rage over the unjust neglect of Clare still flares up occasionally, the first decades of the twenty-first century have stabilized most critics' sense to the extent that we can now put those past injuries to rest.

Still, it is worth reviewing here the steps that have brought us to this point, not least because the history of the reception of Clare offers insights into the effects class has on the diverse agendas of criticism. No special pleading is necessary: the critical reception of working-class writers is always beset with such problems, from Stephen Duck's and Mary Collier's era through to our own. In Clare's case, being presented to the world as an uneducated peasant meant that his work suffered the type of

sweeping dismissal that Charles Mackay included in his anonymous 1869 *All the Year Round* essay 'An English Peasant', five years after Clare's death and a year before the death of Dickens:

> If there be any class of the English people that is pre-eminently unknown to itself and to all other classes, it is that of the farm labourer. The squire or other great landed proprietor of the neighbourhood knows them after a certain fashion, as he knows his cattle; but of the labourer's mind he has as little idea as he has of that of the animal which he bestrides in the hunting-field. He knows the peasant to be a useful drudge, like the horse that draws the plough, but unlike the horse, to be a burden upon the poor-rates, either present or prospective ... In the southern shires, the condition of the peasant is virtually that of the slave. He is tied to his parish by circumstances too formidable to be overcome by any such small and weak agencies as he can employ ... Why the English peasantry, the border men excepted, should be inferior in energy, or in the art of bettering themselves, to their compeers in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales, has never yet been satisfactorily explained ... Whatever may be the cause, there is a lack of imagination among them that leads to lack of enterprise, and that seems somehow or other to run in the blood of those portions of the British people that are not of Celtic origin or intermixture. The peasantry of Saxon England have among them but two poets, Robert Bloomfield, the author of the Farmer's Boy, and John Clare, author of the Village Minstrel; neither of them a poet with any claims to the first or even to the second rank, while Scotland's poets, sprung from the agricultural and labouring classes, are to be numbered by scores, including Robert Burns, a greater than fifty Bloomfields and Clares rolled into one, and a long bead roll of genuine bards and minstrels, of whom it is sufficient to name Allan Ramsay, the barber, William Ferguson, the sailor, James Hogg, the shepherd, Robert Tannahill, the weaver, Hugh Miller, the stonemason, and Jean Glover, the strolling tinker.[10]

Here the Scottish poet, journalist and editor Mackay does condemn the hopeless trap of peasant life – lumping together the reputations of two quite different English labouring-class poets as he does so – but he is as condemnatory of the 'innate sluggishness of blood' of the southern English peasant as he is of rural poverty. He castigates peasants for 'making serfs of themselves by their ignorance and limpet-like tenacity in sticking to the parish in which they were born' more than he does an economic system which allows a farmer to regard the peasant 'on a par with the concern he has for his inanimate tools'.[11] For Mackay, as it seems was the case for his editor Dickens, 'small' Clare, like all English peasants, is eminently forgettable.

Mackay's essay can stand as a low point in Clare's critical reception – though in truth it is actually one among many examples we might have

chosen to focus upon, as Victorian writers such as Mackay wrestled with the political and cultural presence, and growing influence, of an increasingly unified, and unionized, working class. It is instructive that in his vituperative 1867 essay 'The Working Classes', Mackay trumpets his opposition to the Trades Union movement, the campaign for universal manhood suffrage, and 'the organisation of labour – Communism, Socialism, Fourierism, Proudhonism or whatever else it may be or has been called'.[12] Thus, Clare is just a baby thrown out with the dirty working-class bathwater. Nevertheless, for every Mackay there was a counteracting Edwin Paxton Hood or Samuel Smiles, Victorian gentlemen prominently praising Clare as a prime example of just what an educated labourer might become even in the toughest of circumstances: both a model of industry and an example of the power of literacy. For Hood in 1851, Clare was 'the Wordsworth of Labour', while Smiles in 1861 thought the poet was 'entitled to a high place, if not to the highest, among the uneducated poets of England.'[13] Writers and commentators of all stripes returned again and again to Clare throughout the late nineteenth century – though Roger Sales rightly notes that Clare appears most often as just one name among many in 'litanies of humble geniuses'.[14] Clare was a low-key yet persistent presence in late nineteenth-century assessments of the literary landscape, and this fact accounts for a small but significant crop of editions after the turn of the twentieth century. The first of these, a 1901 collection edited by the poet Norman Gale,[15] met with a brutal dismissal in the Tory *Spectator*:

> Clare had just the amount of ability which is most dangerous to a man's character. It was enough to lift him out of his place; it did not lift him high enough. His verse was remarkable as written by a farm-labourer; it was never really good. Mr. Gale thinks that the public which refused to praise, or even to read, him were 'blind bats.' It may be so; we must own to the same blindness. The verse has the common fatal fault of not being interesting. It is not thoughtful; it is not even sonorous; one never feels disposed to read it aloud. It is not even minutely true to Nature.[16]

After this violent knock-back – which was probably as much a coded rejection of the then deeply unfashionable 'Bodley Head' 1890s poet Gale[17] as it was of Clare – the twentieth century would prove far friendlier to Clare's work. The story of the emergence of biographies and editions has been told many times, starting with the groundwork laid by Frederick Martin and J. L. Cherry[18] in the nineteenth century, and proceeding through collections of increasing breadth and editorial quality by a succession of poets – Arthur Symons, Alan Porter with Edmund Blunden and

then Blunden on his own.[19] The editorial baton was next picked up by the educationalist academic J. W. Tibble and his remarkably prolific partner Anne Tibble, who also co-edited Clare with Leonard Clark and Kelsey Thornton.[20] The Tibbles' substantial efforts were complemented by two editions from the influential all-round man of letters – and notoriously scathing reviewer – Geoffrey Grigson.[21] Such charismatic figures, with their increasingly solid scholarship, built a platform for a series of committed academic editors from the 1960s onwards. Initiated by Geoffrey Summerfield, an editing project which was joined by Eric Robinson in the early 1960s produced new editions and marked a sea-change in the way Clare was presented.[22] Textual primitivism – that is, transcription of original handwritten manuscripts into published type, yet with an ostensibly minimalist level of editorial intervention (no grammatical correction, no indentation, no additional punctuation, no orthographic regularization) – had starkly arrived. Summerfield and Robinson's early partnership led in turn to Robinson's forty-year-long editing project with David Powell, Margaret Grainger and Paul Dawson that by 2003 had produced the monumental nine-volume Oxford Clarendon edition of the complete poems, to which we will return below.[23]

The corrective we offer to this well-rehearsed history is that while Clare's work certainly suffered its share of academic marginalization and neglect, there was no dramatic opening of Tutankhamun's tomb, as it were, in which Clare was gloriously rediscovered after having been buried and locked away. To imagine any single watershed moment of this kind is to deny Clare's commonality with many writers whose fortunes have risen and fallen with fluctuations in literary-critical taste and curatorial practice. As we have said above, since his death in 1864 Clare has received quiet yet constant attention, both despite and because of his uneasy periodicity. Never quite accepted as one of the great male Romantic poets, he has also been perceived (mistakenly) as having been out of contact with the swift changes of Victorian literary culture, by virtue of having been institutionalized in the same year that the young Queen was crowned. There are of course other literary categories and typologies we might use to frame our understanding of Clare but, as David Simpson pointed out in 1999, they never seem to fit him very well:

> Economic hardship, sexual and emotional deprivation, physical discomfort, geographical displacement, a sense of place made no-place by enclosure and by just growing up – these are the coordinates of Clare's poetry. Many of the compensatory gestures – the patriotism, the conformity to convention, the nods to other poets and poems so evident in the 1820 *Poems Descriptive of*

> *Rural Life and Scenery* – either register as hollow or unfelt or require for their elucidation a deep literary historical knowledge that is seldom to be found and is therefore seldom taught. The sheer complexity of the mix makes it very hard to reduce Clare to the 'historical generalisations' identified in a fine essay by Nicholas Birns as the stuff of most historical criticism. Too literate for a primitive, not just a dialect poet, too patriotic for a 'radical', too psychologically complex for a passive victim of repression, and too nostalgic for a realist, Clare makes a difficulty for any of the obviously contending categories by which we might make him familiar . . . The love of books and writing that takes Clare 'out' of the laboring class does not comfortably insert him into any other group, least of all that of guild of professional writers.[24]

Yet, owing in part to the critical reflexivity his situation has always demanded, Clare's ongoing status as an uncategorizable literary and social misfit might in the end have served him well. Clare's work is now more highly regarded, more widely considered and his name more broadly recognized and referred to, than at any time since the mostly warm reception his first book received in 1820. Perhaps we no longer need be concerned about Clare's place in the canon. The inclusion in Romantic and Victorian period study of writers of similar social class to Clare – along with the serious study of the work of women, servants and slaves, and of texts couched in regional or dialect languages and eschewing 'polite' forms – has done much to expose the baldly ideological nature of academic literary canon formation in general. The cultural processes of valuation that once excluded Clare do not now form a valid or settled model of literary or academic taste. By the same token, Clare scholars have tended of late to extend their scepticism of a fixed Romantic canon towards any fixed listing of Clare's 'best' poems – fittingly, perhaps, given Clare's many lurching stops and starts in the making of his own career. It might not be so much that Clare is no longer on the margins, but rather that any centrally agreed ground has been dissolved.

Clare has become a central part of – and a leading inspiration for – the ongoing 'recovery' of many other working-class, labouring-class, regional, dialect or otherwise socially marginalized writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We now appreciate that contemporary tastes, social mores, fashions and historically determined prejudices influence which texts are read and which forgotten, rather than any council-of-elders' agreement over eternal verities of literary value. Access to Clare is now guided by a plurality of scholarly and popular editions and by Jonathan Bate's critical biography, as well as by a range of interpretive approaches taking in psychology, music, creative writing, dialect and language, literary

genre and form, folklore, cultural materialism, botany, ornithology, eco-criticism and environmentalism, geography and local history. It is no surprise, then, that his work has enjoyed a surge of rich, diversifying and popularizing attention.

Given the shift in the quality and range of interest in Clare across the past twenty years or so, we felt it was high time for a newly commissioned set of critical essays on the poet. It is now more than two decades since the first major critical essay collection focused on the poet – the Cambridge University Press collection of 1994.[25] Since that collection, critical work has expanded exponentially,[26] while access to the poetry has been dramatically improved by the completion of the Oxford Clarendon edition of the poetry, which amounts finally to nine weighty volumes published between 1984 and 2003. Other collections from the same team – and latterly from editors sometimes with contrasting editorial and interpretative regimes – have given the study of Clare a firm if, at times, contested textual foundation for further critical advances. The monumental impact of the Oxford edition is beyond doubt: it is an extraordinary achievement of determined, committed scholarly labour. Editing Clare is hard work indeed. His manuscripts are notoriously and riotously ungovernable, and often unreadable. Some are even disintegrating due to the corrosiveness of Clare's homemade ink – his written words have become looping, sometimes indecipherable, holes in paper. Yet the unsettled nature of Clare's textual life remains a dominant and idiosyncratic feature of the study of this poet. Presentations of his work include the textually primitivist extreme of the Oxford edition of the poetry; Margaret Grainger's edition of the *Natural History Prose Writings* and Mark Storey's edition of the letters,[27] both textually primitivist in their own ways; and the Mid-Northumberland Arts Group (MidNAG) and Carcanet editions of poetry and prose[28] (similarly primitivist though with some variance). More editorially liberal agendas are seen in the parallel texts of Tim Chilcott's Carcanet edition of *The Shepherd's Calendar* (showing transcriptions in tandem of both manuscript and 1827 published versions), and in the lightly polished selections such as those edited by Kelsey Thornton (the selection used to teach Clare in English secondary schools) and Jonathan Bate[29] (who argues there and elsewhere for a polished text[30]). An altogether different realm of textual reproduction is found online, where one may find complete facsimiles and transcriptions of the original lifetime publications; though of varying quality and reliability, these online versions of the poems comprise as important an entry point to Clare as any other today. This textual and editorial complexity – which is politicized,

sometimes heatedly, and even fought over via lawyers' letters – means that still more critical and theoretical attention will have to be paid by future Clare scholars to the ways in which his texts might best be presented to an ever-widening readership. There remains a lot of work to do. The more plural the audience becomes for Clare – and the more varied its demands at different points and levels of access to his world and work – the more multifarious the editions and presentations of his work will necessarily become. This is beginning to happen, and the prospect of this next stage in the developing history of Clare's life and texts is an exciting one indeed. This is a good time to be interested in Clare.

This collection of new work charts some of the breadth of Clare's diversity, featuring essays which range from Clare's engagement with poetic tradition to his contemporary presence as a beacon for environmental thinking. In Adam Rounce's hands, Clare's encounter with his eighteenth-century poetic forebears Thomson and Cowper has 'benefits and limitations', yet remains foundationally significant. Sam Ward grapples with the complex, subtle politics of Clare's relationships with patrons and promoters – especially with the sometimes toxic, yet hugely supportive, presence of Lord Radstock in Clare's early writing life. Richard Cronin newly assesses Clare's place in the vibrant London and *London Magazine* scene, which Clare was both a part of and apart from. Fiona Stafford on colour, and Sarah Zimmerman on birds' nests, distinctively pursue the poetic complexity of Clare's delicate, artful presentations of nature, while John Burnside looks to Clare as an insightful commentator on his own times, and on our contemporary ecological and social issues. Emma Mason is the first critic to consider how Clare's celebrated green politics might be informed by his understanding of divinity and faith, while Robert Heyes seeks to dispel some green myths with a detailed account of Clare's natural history prose, and the rich social contexts out of which such knowledge emerged. Scott McEathron and Simon Kövesi consider the reception and presentation of Clare, through the career of his first biographer Frederick Martin, and the framing imprint of death, respectively. One hundred and fifty years after Clare's death, the literary riches he left to us all are proving far from small.

This inventory confirms the current consensus that critical responses to Clare need no longer be framed by justifications of his work's value, or even by preliminary discussions of the phenomenon of labouring-class poetry. Instead, we find at this moment a sense of interpretive capaciousness that Clare himself, who told the Northampton physician Dr P. R. Nesbitt that his poetry 'came to him whilst walking in the fields – that he kicked it out

of the clods', might have found appealing. Indeed, if there is one principle uniting the essays collected here, it is that all proceed from the conviction that, as Nesbitt noted, Clare possessed traits 'we are in the habit of associating with . . . the highest order of intellect'.[31] This is a position that frees us from the false dichotomy of Clare as either importunate peasant or martyred genius, and that helps us recognize the striking variety of topics and issues to which Clare responded as a thinking artist. The spirit of this collection is to look directly at these interests, and to confront their inevitable remaking and appropriation in still-emerging contexts of reception.

Notes

1. John Forster, *The Life of Charles Dickens*, ed. J. W. T. Ley (London: Cecil Palmer, 1928), pp. 820–2. Forster's biography was first published 1872–4.
2. For an overview of the reception of Frederick Martin's 1865 biography, and then J. L. Cherry's *Life and Remains* of 1873, see *Critical Heritage*, pp. 15–16. For an account of Martin's career, see the essay by Scott McEathron in this volume, pp. 118–45.
3. John Lucas draws some interesting parallels between Dickens' fiction and Clare's life in his *John Clare* (Plymouth: Northcote House, 1994), pp. 2 and 7.
4. *The Times*, 20 May 1964, p. 13. This leader would most likely have been written by the paper's editor at the time, William Haley. The Samuel Johnson witticism was originally aimed at women, so Haley's redirection suggests there are parallels between the status of women and working-class people with intellectual aspirations. James Boswell recollects: 'I told him I had been that morning at a meeting of the people called Quakers, where I had heard a woman preach. JOHNSON. "Sir, a woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on *his* hind legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it done at all."' *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 9th edn, 4 vols. (London: T. Cadell et al., 1822), vol. 1, p. 408. For a feminist assessment, see Alan Richardson, 'Romanticism and the Colonization of the Feminine', in Anne K. Mellor (ed.), *Romanticism and Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 13–25 (p. 14).
5. *Letters*, p. 604.
6. The authoritative account of Allen's asylum, and his care for Clare, is by Pamela Faithfull, *An Evaluation of an Eccentric: Matthew Allen MD, Chemical Philosopher, Phrenologist, Pedagogue and Mad-Doctor, 1783–1845* (University of Sheffield: PhD Thesis, 2001), especially pp. 173–88. For further discussion see Chapter 7 by Simon Kövesi in this volume, pp. 146–66.
7. 1862 is the date ascribed by the National Portrait Gallery, London, to W. W. Law's photograph. National Portrait Gallery number: P1101.
8. In his review of Ley's new edition of the Forster biography of Dickens, poet and editor Alan Porter writes that 'a concentration upon one literary figure