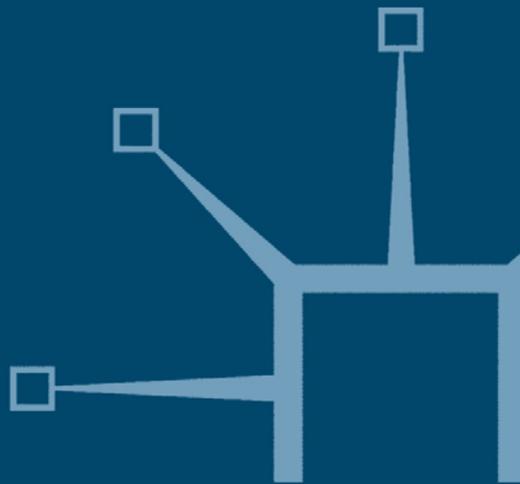


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John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader

Paul Chirico



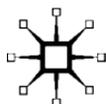
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For Lucy

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Abbreviations

- Early Poems* *The Early Poems of John Clare: 1804–1822*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)
- Middle Poems* *John Clare, Poems of the Middle Period: 1822–1837*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996–2003)
- Later Poems* *The Later Poems of John Clare: 1837–1864*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984)
- By Himself* *John Clare, By Himself*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington: Mid-Northumberland Arts Group; Manchester: Carcanet, 1996)
- Letters* *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)
- Natural History* *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, ed. Margaret Grainger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983)
- Prose* *The Prose of John Clare*, ed. Anne Tibble and John Tibble (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951)

1

Introduction: Whose Clare?

John Clare's champions, like his detractors, have always tended to exaggerate his cultural naivety and to portray him as an innocent victim of the vicious machinations of the publishing trade. This study aims to counter such misrepresentations by restoring the suppressed history of his cultural pragmatism. I discuss the ways in which he sought – and sometimes failed – to counter his social and cultural disadvantages, offering new insights into the publishing trade of the 1820s and 1830s, the mechanisms of canon formation, the processes of textual transmission in a culturally disadvantaged, even semi-literate rural society, and the uses and effects of various forms of intertextuality. While these investigations do shed new light on certain aspects of Clare's biography, I attend centrally to his writings rather than to his (compelling) life-story, offering detailed readings of a broad range of the carefully constructed texts – many of them unpublished until recent years, or unnoticed by critics – in which all these related histories converge.

Central to my approach is a desire to take seriously Clare's own claims for his writing and his repeated appeals to the judgement of readers in a distant future. In my investigation of his sophisticated poetics, I am keenly aware that his primary declared concern is with the progress and legacy of the texts that he repeatedly describes as his 'offspring'.¹ I counter the conventional view of Clare's naivety by revealing his covert quotations, discussing his uneasy adoption of mythologies and analysing the metaphorical density of his writing. I investigate his sustained interest in the historical complexity of his own geographical and cultural world, in what might now be termed the deconstruction of culturally determined abstracts such as antiquity and superstition. In my analysis Clare celebrates repetitive creativity, in the literary labours of writing and reading just as in agricultural labour

and the cycles of nature. This is the central creative reflexivity of his writing: his fervent imagination of his future readers, and those readers' guided figuration, their authorised reinvention of Clare's world and of his texts.

Decisions affecting the shapes of those texts and the types of guidance they offer demand the attention of each of his readers. John Taylor's editorial practice has been the subject of prolonged controversy. Critics attempting to analyse his relationship with Clare have tended to mine their correspondence for quotations demonstrating either irreconcilable enmity or constructive partnership. Hints can readily be found to support either model and can be convincingly manipulated out of context. Over recent decades the Oxford University Press edition of Clare's poetry, under the editorship of Eric Robinson and others, has been widely praised for freeing him from the unwelcome constraints of punctuation and from the dictates of the political, moral and aesthetic codes which circumscribed his original publications; now, in the uncertain calm after a rancorous but apparently inconclusive commercial battle over control of the copyright of Clare's manuscripts, intense debate continues over the merits of presenting his writings in uncorrected form.²

The Oxford editors claim to have 'tried as far as possible to present Clare as he wrote', removing Taylor's emendations in favour of 'Clare's original intentions'.³ Many would query that latter term, asking whether a reconstructed authorial intention can indeed carry the authority to direct readerly interpretations or editorial decisions.⁴ But in any case to embark on such a formidable editorial project is necessarily to adopt systematic procedures, rendering paradoxical the editors' claims to present an authentic, unmediated text. One of the great achievements of the edition is the remarkable recovery of deleted poems, yet this would scarcely meet Clare's approval. As early as 1819 he recorded his fear of the possibility of such a trawl through rejected manuscripts:

If I knew such things I disapprove of should appear in print after my death it would be the greatest torture possible⁵

The editors themselves cite this letter, but their explanation of their contravention of Clare's expressed wish, which indeed makes a good case for the excavation of material buried in the manuscripts, does nothing to resolve the serious paradox of their continuing appeal to authorial intention in other respects in justifying their editorial methodology.⁶

Of course, Clare is only one of many writers whose work is 'saved' against their wishes, and few present-day critics would discourage the recovery of such material despite an explicit authorial injunction. More controversial is Robinson and Powell's treatment of what they term Clare's 'overpunctuated poems':

As Clare matured and became more confident he tended to reduce punctuation to a minimum both in prose and verse. In some of his early poems, in the versions submitted to Drury, however, he fell into the opposite extreme, probably in response to suggestions coming from several quarters that he ought to be more 'correct'. When he did this the punctuation became so excessive that it seriously interfered with the reader's enjoyment of the poetry. We have therefore removed the punctuation when it was clearly wrong but have provided the evidence of exactly what we have done. The reader may therefore easily restore Clare's original punctuation if he so wishes in the few poems that we have dealt with in this way.⁷

In the 33 poems concerned, the appeal to 'original intentions' is all but dropped in favour of an accommodation of the present-day reader's enjoyment.⁸ Such an approach clearly marks the production of a supposedly 'original' text as in fact the projection of spurious 'authenticity' onto a writer who never quite settled into his naivety.

Clare had many editors in his lifetime. His tentative sense of a literary community – indeed, the whole history of his publications – relies on his timely, repeated exchange of manuscripts with these editors. He sent manuscripts to each of them in the expectation that they would be corrected, and his complaints at delays to that process were far more frequent than his infamous curses at overzealous interference. The practical problems of the postal system were a persistent source of irritation and delay, and were compounded by episodes in which Clare's mail went astray or was held up by shady intermediaries.⁹ Even when his manuscripts were successfully transferred, Clare's ever-worsening handwriting was a major obstacle to the processing of his texts. Most obstructively of all, of course, Clare (like Taylor) suffered a series of illnesses which left him unable to work effectively for long periods. Clare's gradual estrangement from Taylor results more from the latter's increasing reluctance or inability to set aside the time and creativity necessary to decipher, select, rearrange and return Clare's manuscripts than from the occasional disputes over dialect or propriety.¹⁰

The persistent tradition of editorial contentiousness in Clare studies is ironic in the light of Clare's fears for his posthumous reputation, clearly expressed in a letter to Taylor early in 1821:

In respects of travelling into the unknown hereafter I hope that mine may be a long way off & yours longer to stay & write my life & Edit a collected Book of the poetry so that I shall have no dread on my mind of being scandalizd with a bad character & so as to leave no Enemy (for I have many skulking ones that pretend friendship) a corner to spout his venom in¹¹

Showing an enduring romantic faith in their understanding of the author's intention, a succession of academics, editors and publishers has traded Clare's praises and curses, attempting to avoid identification with the venomous enemies of whom he complained, and instead seeking his posthumous blessing.

My approach in this study is deliberately pluralist. As a rule I have used the Oxford edition for my texts; it is in many ways an admirable work of scholarship – vast, laboriously compiled and (at last) complete. It has become, and will remain for some time, the standard edition, and is the only printed edition for a great number of poems. However, I have no commitment to the purity of Clare's manuscript text, not because a punctuated text is easier to read, but because I am interested in Clare's engagement in the production and consumption of literature. Wherever it seems appropriate, therefore, I have returned to the early published texts in order to discuss the works from which Clare was attempting to make his living. I have only rarely chosen to work from Clare's manuscripts, and in those instances I have generally been led to do so by the textual variants recorded in the Oxford University Press edition which, without providing the exhaustive level of detail necessary for a full reconstruction of the various compositional stages of individual poems, does offer many intriguing insights into the complex authorial and editorial processes which produced (and continue to produce) them. My approach is a pragmatic recognition of the vastness of the enterprise of working through Clare's manuscripts, but my apparently paradoxical decision to use recent texts while disputing their premise is also a recognition of the arbitrary or collaborative nature of every version of a cultural product, including the first.¹²

In examining Clare's position at the borders of early nineteenth-century culture, this study aims to re-establish the close connections between his celebrated commitment to time and place and his engage-

ment with literary culture. His marginality is not simply a motivation or justification for certain types of subject matter; it enforces an unusually strained and estranged procedure for literary production, and it prompts a very particular and very deliberate series of appeals from the poet to his absent readership. After this brief introduction to some of the textual and editorial issues surrounding Clare, this chapter continues with an investigation of the early responses to his work, in particular reading Taylor's 'Introduction' to his first volume as an understated manifesto which both addresses the expectations of the culture into which Clare entered and identifies the challenging innovations of his poetry. The chapter concludes with a brief sketch of the subsequent development of my argument. Based on a detailed analysis of his pre-asylum poetry and a reappraisal of his writing career, this study aims to explore fully the contributions of Clare's texts to an expanded canon in which they have, in truth, long been welcomed.

John Taylor and Clare's early reception

We have seldom an opportunity of learning the unmixed and unadulterated impression of the loveliness of nature on a man of vivid perception and strong feeling, equally unacquainted with the arts and reserve of the world, and with the riches, rules, and prejudices of literature. Such a man is Clare.¹³

Many reviewers greeted John Clare with enthusiasm, hoping for a noble savage, an uncomplicated mind freed from the artificial systems inculcated by formal education. Such fanciful suggestions of his isolation from the world of books have proved remarkably persistent, his eagerness to see his work in print too often forgotten. In fact, his early references to other writers were both numerous and capricious; he tended to adopt the role of anthologist, reworking antecedent texts into his own descriptions.¹⁴ The growing body of evidence of Clare's textual debts and literary imitations, of his relations both intertextual and social, qualifies any assessment of the limits imposed by his geographic, economic and cultural marginality.¹⁵ Yet despite his determination to transgress those limits, he remained frequently isolated by illness, poverty or bad weather, so that his concept of literary community continued to find its most acute expression in his allusive compositional method. His enduring solitariness is perhaps figured most prominently in his frequent references to the materials with which and on which he wrote. Only after he had established himself as a writer

would this material consciousness combine with a growing confidence in his literary judgement to produce a perceptive and provocative analysis of the structures of literary culture, and a sustained project to establish alternative traditions. At the beginning of his career, as I will argue, any such critique or programme remained implicit, in his covert intertextuality, in his narratives of creativity and inarticulacy, and in his celebration of a vernacular language and culture deeply rooted in popular memory.

The 'Introduction' by his editor and publisher John Taylor is the fullest, most perceptive and, of course, textually most privileged treatment of Clare's first volume, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820).¹⁶ It has often been accused of setting a patronising tone for reviews of the volume; but it could equally be credited with the achievement of establishing far more ambitious terms for later responses and of pre-empting and carefully undermining a number of likely criticisms of Clare's work. Taylor certainly attempted to smooth the way for the poet's unusual practices; yet he was in the paradoxical position of setting out a very deliberate and robust defence of Clare's linguistic experimentation or unorthodoxy while at the same time editing out some of that innovative material. In the continuing controversy surrounding the editing of Clare many critics have treated Taylor as unproblematically representative of the prevailing conditions which governed Clare's publishing history, while ignoring or misrepresenting the details of his personal relationship with Clare and of his necessary role as public sponsor of his works. Criticism of Taylor has focused on his revisions of Clare's dialect, punctuation, spelling and titles, editorial interventions which have been seen as the textual embodiments of Taylor's regrettable presentation of Clare himself as a 'peasant poet'. In the most notable exceptions to these repeated condemnations, Tim Chilcott and Zachary Leader have defended Taylor from such spurious charges of cultural vandalism.¹⁷ Through a thorough cross-reading of the correspondence and manuscripts, Leader in particular offers an exhaustive appraisal of the precise effects of Taylor's textual alterations, and shows how often critics have fallen into misleading accounts of this important relationship.¹⁸ Taylor's behaviour, especially as the 1820s wore on, cannot escape censure altogether, and Alan Vardy has highlighted the inflexibility of his advice to Clare in response to opportunities to diversify his literary output to include songs and natural history writing as well as a broader poetic range.¹⁹ In extensive recent work Tim Chilcott has added further to his defence of Taylor's handling of *The Shepherds Calendar*, a text that is central to this editorial

debate, not least because it was the discovery of the extent to which the poem was altered before its 1827 publication that prompted the editorial stance adopted by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield nearly half a century ago.²⁰

It is orthodox to suggest that in promoting Clare his publishers were catching the tail-end of a fashion for peasant poetry which had embraced Robert Bloomfield, Ann Yearsley, Stephen Duck and others. But this is hardly satisfactory in view of the notable literary controversies of the intervening years, not least the theoretical statements of William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge and the bitter wrangle over John Keats.²¹ Writers such as Robert Burns and James Hogg also belong in such a history, but the truth is that, despite the importance of such cultural traditions, each case remains unique; each writer's fate depends largely on the cultural access, influence and authority of sponsors, editors, publishers and promoters, and on more serendipitous processes of publishing politics. The publication of Clare's first volume in January 1820 coincided with the launch of the *London Magazine*. The poet benefited greatly from the interest created by this periodical and from the vocal support of its columns: the second article of the first number is entitled 'Some Account of John Clare, an Agricultural Labourer and Poet', a sympathetic if guarded introduction accompanied by three poems.²² The significance of this prominent support should not be underestimated, particularly given the emphasis which John Scott, editor of the *London Magazine*, would place on the representative, almost talismanic, status of the opening article of the first issue of *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* under new editorship.²³

The feud with *Blackwood's* developed rapidly and bitterly and soon led to Scott's death.²⁴ Given his prominent adoption, Clare might have been expected to emerge into the firing line of attacks like John Lockhart's celebrated dismissal of Keats in 1818 as just another man with ideas above his station:

The just celebrity of Robert Burns and Miss Baillie has had the melancholy effect of turning the heads of we know not how many farm-servants and unmarried ladies; our very footmen compose tragedies, and there is scarcely a superannuated governess in the island that does not leave a roll of lyrics behind her in her band-box.²⁵

In the event Lockhart responded far less vehemently to Clare's first publication, writing, 'I fear it would be very difficult to shew that he

deserves half the fuss that has been made.²⁶ Other reviewers were less restrained: the *Guardian*, for example, judged Clare ‘simply a tolerable versifier’:

all that he has done, is daily done in every school in England by boys of 12 years old. The panegyrics of his bustling friends are ridiculous, and, if he has not a higher understanding than theirs, he will abandon his natural calling, bind himself to a desk and disease, write middling verses year by year, and after having exhausted the liberality of his noble benefactors, and wearied the ear of the public by compliment and complaint, will go as the victims of unfounded applause have always gone, and perish in desertion and decay.²⁷

This spirited defence at the gates of literary production doubles neatly as a concern for the economic and physical well-being of the falsely praised poet; its peculiar hygienics is founded on a complacent association of the labourer’s ‘natural calling’ with health, contrasted with the disease associated with the repetitive labour of textual production. It is difficult to judge the degree of cynicism inherent in such remarks, which again contrast favourably with Lockhart’s account of Keats, while sharing a tone of dismissive condescension.²⁸ To put it another way, it is hard to measure the extent to which an analysis of the changes in reading and writing habits had thus far identified the likely replacement of Lockhart’s comic band of governesses by a potentially destabilising army of articulate labourers.

In recognition of the social daring of Clare’s literary endeavour, however, several reviewers of his first volume were at pains to entrench their sense of inclusive conservatism. The *Anti-Jacobin Review* is eloquently representative of such paternalistic affirmation:

This little volume is the production of a second Burns; a poet in humble life, whose genius has burst through the fetters with which his situation had surrounded it; and astonished the neighbouring villages with the brilliancy of his song. Amidst all the privations attendant on the life of the labouring peasant, this genuine child of poesy has written a volume, many articles in which would reflect no disgrace upon a far nobler name, and we are glad, that a public-spirited individual has snatched them from obscurity.²⁹

The assertion of a cultural genealogy (‘genuine child of poesy’) begins to control the potentially destabilising effect on the social order of this