

University of Montana

ScholarWorks at University of Montana

English Faculty Publications

English

Summer 2003

Introduction: New Directions John Clare Studies

James C. McKusick

University of Montana - Missoula, mckusickj@umkc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/eng_pubs



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Recommended Citation

McKusick, James C., "Introduction: New Directions John Clare Studies" (2003). *English Faculty Publications*. 18.

https://scholarworks.umt.edu/eng_pubs/18

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the English at ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in English Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.

Introduction: New Directions in John Clare Studies

The John Clare Conference, organized by the John Clare Society of North America, March 21-22, 2003, was held at the Belmont Conference Center, an eighteenth-century manor house surrounded by gently rolling meadows near Baltimore, Maryland. The program explored new directions in Clare scholarship and celebrated the completion of the Oxford English Text edition of John Clare's poetry. This rich feast of social and cultural activities included a reading of Clare's poetry by Galway Kinnell, an exhibition of original prints and watercolors by Barbara Weber, and a recital of Clare's folk songs by Victoria Robinson and Tim White. Participants, including undergraduates, graduates, junior and senior Romanticists, and nonspecialist readers of Clare's poetry, came from all over the U.S. and U.K.

The publication of the final volume in the monumental nine-volume Oxford English Text edition of John Clare's poetry is truly a milestone in Clare studies, representing the completion of a forty-year editorial project that was started in 1963 by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, continued with assistance from David Powell and Margaret Grainger, and completed with the collaboration of P.M.S. Dawson. The final volume—*Poems of the Middle Period*, volume 5—was on display at the conference, and several participants remarked on its indispensable features, which include a list of corrections to the eight previous volumes, a consolidated glossary, and consolidated lists of titles and first lines. The completion of this definitive edition marks the end of an era when many of Clare's poems languished in manuscript and were known only to a handful of specialists. By making all of Clare's poetry available to scholars, this edition provides an essential starting-point for all future Clare criticism. The papers in this collection reveal the emerging contours of Clare's poetic career and will, we hope, stimulate new studies as well.

This selection of papers reflect new directions in Clare studies, the energy and enthusiasm of the scholars. The first three papers reassess Clare's relationship with the nature. David Simpson examines the question of poetic genre in "*The Lament of Swordy Well*," observing that the poem gives voice to an unbounded place, "thereby inventing a form of personification unrecorded in rhetorical theory." Bridget Keegan is likewise concerned with the question of poetic genre in "Clare's River Poems," arguing that Clare "originally and interestingly diverts the history of river poetry, to claim it for laboring-class poets." Alan Vardy examines the "natural history prose elegies" identifiable in Clare's 1824-25 journal, a form of "imaginative reverie" that typically engages in melancholy reflection on time and change in the landscape. Each paper is centrally concerned with Clare's sense of place, not only in terms of his life but also his engagement with literary tradition, his grief in the face of environmental devastation,

and his tacit critique of British nationalism, Romantic nostalgia, and the heritage industry.

Eric Robinson brings a lifetime of editorial experience to his paper, "Editing Clare: Words." Robinson points out that "many of what have been taken as Clare's misspellings are to be found in dictionaries of the period," and he calls for more intensive study of Clare's dialect, Scots, and Middle English vocabulary in the context of contemporary usage. The 2,730 words that appear in the consolidated glossary of the Oxford *Clare* will be an essential starting-point for any future investigation of Clare's vocabulary, a project that should be heartily recommended to graduate students who have expertise in linguistics.

Paul Chirico and Gary Harrison both investigate Clare's profound psychological and aesthetic response to the tragic life stories of his contemporaries, Keats and Byron. In "Clare and the Ghost of Keats," Chirico develops a fresh perspective on Clare's sense of poetic vocation, arguing that "Clare clearly finds in Keats . . . a new counter-cultural inspiration." In "Hybridity, Mimicry and John Clare's *Child Harold*," Harrison examines Clare's response to Byron's flamboyant poetic persona. By imitating Byron's best-selling poem, Harrison argues, Clare was able to "defy the moral fashioning to which he had been subjected not only by the literary elite but by his 'keepers' in the asylum. Also concerned with the asylum period, Joanna Ball's paper on Clare's reading in the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum, 1841-1864, corrects the misconception that Clare did little or no reading during this period. In fact, based on detailed and well-focused archival research, Ball proves that while in the asylum Clare had access to newspapers and journals, and regularly borrowed from the Asylum Library of over 10,000 volumes. Such information invites a detailed critical reassessment of Clare's later poetry.

The papers published here represent only a sample of the fine scholarship presented at the John Clare Conference 2003, but they exemplify several of the most vital themes and issues. I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the individuals and organizations whose hard work and generous financial support made the conference possible. I am grateful to the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, which provided substantial funding and staff support; Eric Robinson and Bridget Keegan, who first envisioned it; Christoph Irscher, who assisted in planning and organization; and Scott McEathron and Sarah Zimmerman, who offered prompt and perceptive comments on conference submissions. I am grateful to Maura Smyth for her generous assistance throughout the conference.

James C. McKusick
University of Maryland, Baltimore County