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## "Autumn":

### John Clare and the Altered Fenland

In 1832, John Clare moved from his "home of homes" in Helpston to Northborough, a village "not above three miles off" by the poet's own calculation.<sup>1</sup> For many readers, Clare's "flitting" has seemed to presage a distinctive shift in the style and tenor of his poetry, as well as a significant deterioration in his mental health that would ultimately lead to his confinement at Epping Forest asylum five years later in 1837.<sup>2</sup> While critics have rightly sought to avoid engaging in the unseemly "parlour game of retrospective diagnosis" (as Roy Porter once described it), there remains broad general agreement as well as sympathy with the reported view of Clare's widow that the poet's "mental malady" was intimately connected with his "love for his native place" and the "grief he felt at being separated from it."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> John Clare, "The Flitting" in *Poems of the Middle Period, 1822-1837*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P. M. S. Dawson, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), III:1, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *MP*; Clare, *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon, 1985), 561, henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *LJC*.

<sup>2</sup> According to Jonathan Bate, a "snap" in Clare's psychology may be heard in the letters and poems he composed at Northborough; *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 126. Erin Lafford has since noted that Clare's flitting continues to be seen as a "tipping point in the poet's mental and psychological health"; "'Fancys or Feelings': John Clare's Hypochondriac Poetics" in *Palgrave Advances in John Clare Studies*, ed. Simon Kövesi and Erin Lafford (London: Palgrave, 2020), 253.

<sup>3</sup> Roy Porter, "All Madness for Writing!: John Clare and the Asylum" in *John Clare in Context*, ed. Geoffrey Summerfield, Hugh Haughton and Adam Philips (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 264. Martha Clare, cited in an obituary to her husband in the *Northampton Herald*, 28 May 1864, 23.

Even as Clare has emerged as "*the* 'poet of place'" (in Simon Kövesi's emphatic phrase), relatively little attention has been paid to the landscape he encountered at Northborough.<sup>4</sup> In his seminal account of the enclosure of Helpston and its effect on Clare's poetry, John Barrell dedicates scarcely more than a few pages to Northborough: primarily concerned with the notable shift in Clare's style in this period, Barrell provides few details regarding the place that inspired this new note.<sup>5</sup> Critical readings by Mina Gorji and Sara Lodge among others have since re-situated Clare in a larger "literary landscape": experimenting with a variety of literary, popular and local traditions, Clare developed what Lodge describes as "landforms" that "attend and attune themselves so closely to the shapes and rhythms of the natural world."<sup>6</sup> But by this logic, a formal analysis of Clare's Northborough writings cannot lose sight of the place itself: environmental history offers unique insights into how Clare's "landforms" developed in response to major civil engineering projects that in the late 1820s and 30s radically altered the "shapes and rhythms" of the landscape surrounding the poet's new home.<sup>7</sup>

The draining of the English fens has been described as "England's greatest ecological disaster" (though there may be some stiff competition for that title): that history is long and

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<sup>4</sup> Simon Kövesi, *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History* (London: Palgrave, 2017), 1.

<sup>5</sup> John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840; an Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 174-81.

<sup>6</sup> Mina Gorji, *John Clare and the Place of Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), esp. 1-11; Sara Lodge, "John Clare's Landforms" in *Palgrave Advances in John Clare Studies*, 89.

<sup>7</sup> Jeremy Davies has made the case that recent scholarship in environmental history offers "new ways to understand the connection between Romantic literary and cultural formations on the one hand, and on the other, fundamental changes in Britain's social and demographic conditions, its technological development, and its colonial, mercantile and ecological relations"; "Romantic Studies and 'The Shorter Industrial Revolution'", *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 61, no 2 (2022): 187.

has been outlined in recent works by Annie Proulx among others, but environmental historians agree that the development of steam technology ushered in a new, more efficient - or, in ecological terms, more disastrous - era of wetland drainage projects in the late 1820s and early 30s.<sup>8</sup> This article outlines a "convergence of the twain" (to borrow Thomas Hardy's phrase), by which this new phase of so-called *progress* coincided with Clare's flitting in the spring of 1832.<sup>9</sup> I argue that Clare's writings in this period acquire a new significance, when we consider that he had lived through the enclosure of Helpston only to find himself in the belly of a new beast of change. Focusing on his late (and sadly neglected) prose essay "Autumn" (1841), I conclude by exploring how Clare recalls and recasts some of the enduring themes of both Romanticism and his own early poetry as he surveys the ecological disaster he had lived to see unfold. More broadly, I argue that Clare's interpretive and creative processes in his essay offer insights into how the "still-evolving" themes of Romanticism have developed - and continue to develop - in responses to the environmental crises of later generations.<sup>10</sup>

### **"On the Brink of the Lincolnshire Fens"**

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<sup>8</sup> Ian D. Rotherham, *The Lost Fens: England's Greatest Ecological Disaster* (Cheltenham: History Press, 2013). Annie Proulx includes a chapter on the fens in *Fen, Bog and Swamp: A Short History of Peatland Destruction and its Role in the Climate Crisis* (London: 4th Estate, 2022), 37-71; Dorothy Summers, *The Great Level: A History of Drainage and Land Reclamation in the Fens* (London: David and Charles, 1976), 162-82.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Hardy, "The Convergence of the Twain" in *Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson (London: Palgrave, 2001), 306.

<sup>10</sup> Stephanie Kuduk Weiner, *Clare's Lyric: John Clare and Three Modern Poets* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

As may be seen from Thomas Kitchin's 1764 map of Northamptonshire (*fig. 1*), Helpston and Northborough are close to, but nonetheless different from each other: in the few miles east towards Northborough, the terrain shifts quite markedly from limestone heath to flat, fenny levels historically known for the waterfowl decoys instructively included on Kitchin's map. Clare may frequently "bemoan the fact that the countryside around Northborough was not like Helpston," but the poet, as Simon J. White sensibly points out, "did not imagine this difference": Clare's feelings, White insists, "were grounded in the physical realities of Northborough."<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, Clare's sense of place is (in Sally Bushell's phrase) "spatio-temporal": he is as much concerned with time as with space, and his writings in this period respond to how the "physical realities" of Northborough were changing as a result of that harbinger of the Victorian period, steam.<sup>12</sup>

"I was born July 13, 1793 at Helpstone," reads Clare's unfinished autobiography, "a gloomy village in Northamptonshire, on the brink of the Lincolnshire fens."<sup>13</sup> From childhood, Clare routinely crossed that "brink" or border into the fenland. He would go with his mother "on a Sunday" to visit his aunt in Peakirk, "when I often wandered in the fen with the boys a bird nesting" and where he first encountered the bittern and other "fen wonders."<sup>14</sup> Situated to the south of Northborough, Peakirk is roughly the same distance from Helpston. Not only did a young Clare make regular visits to his aunt's house, but, following

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<sup>11</sup> Simon J. White, "John Clare's Sonnets and the Northborough Fens," *John Clare Society Journal*, no. 28 (2009): 56.

<sup>12</sup> Sally Bushell, "Unmapping John Clare" in *Romantic Cartographies: Mapping, Literature, Culture*, ed. Sally Bushell, Julia S. Carson and Damian Walford Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 242.

<sup>13</sup> Clare, "Sketches in the Life of John Clare" in *John Clare By Himself*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1996), 2.

<sup>14</sup> Clare, *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, ed. Margaret Grainger (Oxford: Clarendon, 1983), 89; henceforth cited parenthetically in the text as *NHPW*.

his flitting, he returned both to "gloomy" Helpston itself and to some favourite spots within its immediate vicinity. Writing to the vicar of Helpston, Charles Mossop, in September 1832, just a few months after the move, Clare explained that "he could not find time to call" when he was last in Helpston, though he would "be there again in a few days" (*LJC*, 590). In geographical, cultural and emotional terms, Clare had always lived between two worlds, "a slip between two shores" (*NHPW*, 100).

Another 1763 map, drawn up for the "Adventurers and Participants for the Draining of Deeping Fen" (*fig. 2*), shows that Peakirk and Northborough border a notorious wetland that had long been of interest to venture capitalists seeking to reclaim ground in the fens. But such grand schemes proved difficult as well as costly to implement. Outlining the long and protracted history of progress at Deeping Fen, in this article I explore how Clare's writings respond to the changes wrought upon a landscape he had known and that had inspired love, fear and "wonder" in him since boyhood. As the poet himself described the changes he arrived in Northborough to witness take place, "gain mars the landscape every day" ("The Fens," *MP* V:84).

### **“Wonderful Engines for Throwing Up Water”**

When Daniel Defoe toured the fens in 1724-5, he offered his readers a glimpse of "the Fenn-Country" following the *improvements* pioneered by the Dutch engineer Cornelius Vermuyden in the previous century.<sup>15</sup> The picture he paints is mixed. Travelling inland from Lynn towards Wisbech, Defoe and his companions apparently "saw nothing that way to tempt our Curiosity but deep Roads, innumerable Dreyms and Dykes of Water, all Navigable, and a rich

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain, Divided into Circuits or Journeys*, 3 vols (London: Strahan, Mears et. al, 1724-7), I:118.

Soil, the Land bearing a vast Quantity of good Hemp."<sup>16</sup> Turning westwards towards Cambridge, Defoe looked out across the Great Level towards Bedford:

we saw the *Fenn* Country on our Right, almost all cover'd with Water like a Sea, the *Michaelmas* Rains having been very great that Year, they had sent down great Floods of Water from the Upland Countries, and those Fenns being, as may be very properly said, the Sink of no less than thirteen Counties; that is to say, that all the Water, or most part of the Water of thirteen Counties, falls into them, they are often thus overflow'd.<sup>17</sup>

By the time Defoe was writing, large stretches of the fenland, as Eric Ash points out, "had all but reverted to their pre-drainage state."<sup>18</sup> Ash and other environmental historians have underlined the fact that seventeenth-century efforts to drain the fens were significantly impeded by the then-scarcely understood problem of peat shrinkage: since peat contracts as it dries, the ground level of the fens is expected to have fallen considerably throughout the early modern period, at times "until it lay well below the rivers intended to drain it."<sup>19</sup> As the waters poured in from the neighboring uplands, the Bedford Level effectively became (in Defoe's memorable phrase) "the Sink of no less than thirteen Counties." When Defoe comes to reflect on the "History of the Draining of those Fens, by a Set of Gentlemen call'd the *Adventurers*," a note of skepticism is detectable in his references to the "prodigious Expense"

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<sup>16</sup> I:113.

<sup>17</sup> I:119-20.

<sup>18</sup> Eric Ash, *The Draining of the Fens: Projectors, Popular Politics, and State Building in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2017), 304; H. C. Darby, *The Draining of the Fens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), 104-13.

<sup>19</sup> Ash, 303

and evident shortcomings of such a Promethean exercise: "notwithstanding all that Hands could do, or Art contrive, yet sometimes the Waters do still prevail, the Banks break, and whole Levels are overflow'd together."<sup>20</sup>

However, Defoe's account also gestures towards the technological innovations that would subsequently make or reclaim ground in the fens. In the 4<sup>th</sup> edition of Defoe's *Tour Thro the Whole Island of Great Britain*, published in 1748, a new passage details "an Act of Parliament lately passed to enable the Adventurers, Owners, and Proprietors of the taxable Lands" in Deeping Fen, Crowland and elsewhere "to raise a competent Sum for the effectual Draining and future Preservation of all the said Fens."<sup>21</sup> Drainage schemes were first authorized at Deeping Fen in the Elizabethan period, but those schemes took time and innovation to implement effectively: uniquely situated between two river outfalls at the Welland and the Glen, Deeping Fen could not be drained by gravity alone. A 1789 edition of William Camden's *Britannia* notes that this area was "very properly called *Deping*, or the *deep meadow*" because "the plain below it extending many miles, is the deepest of all this fenny country, and the receptacle of many waters; and, which is very extraordinary, much below the level of the river Glen."<sup>22</sup> In 1741, two drainage mills, each fitted with a scoop wheel or "Dutch Engine," were installed "for lifting the water off the fen into Vernatt's Drain."<sup>23</sup> According to the 1748 edition of Defoe, such "wonderful Engines for throwing up

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<sup>20</sup> Defoe, II:145-6.

<sup>21</sup> *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain. Divided into Circuits or Journeys. The Fourth Edition, with Very Great Additions, Improvements, and Corrections; which bring it down to the year 1748*, 4 vols (London: Birt, Osborne et. al, 1748), III:22.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Darby, 146.

<sup>23</sup> W. D. Miles, *A History of Deeping Fen and PODE Hole Pumping Station* (Deeping Fen: Spalding and Pinchbeck Internal Drainage Board, 1965), 17.



Water" were "not to be seen anywhere else"; one such machine "threw up (they assured us) 1200 Tons of Water in half an Hour, and goes by Wind-Sails."<sup>24</sup>

For all the excitement surrounding these "wonderful" new machines, progress was slow and by no means straightforward. When Arthur Young surveyed the county of Lincolnshire in 1799, he singled out improvements at Deeping Fen for particular praise: "twenty years ago the land sold for about £3 an acre . . . and a great deal was in such a state that nobody would rent it: now it is in general worth 20s. an acre, and sells at £20 an acre."<sup>25</sup> As Young's contemporaries pointed out, however, the situation on the ground was rather more complicated:

the drainage of Deeping Fen, so improperly commended by Mr Young, is chiefly effected by three wind engines, above Spalding, that lift the Deeping Fen water into the river Welland (the bed of which, I apprehend, is now higher than the land to be drained) assisted by a side-cut called the West Load, which falls into the Welland just below Spalding, and which district, in violent floods, in a calm, when the engines cannot work, is reduced to a most deplorable condition; more especially when the banks of the Welland give way, or overflow, as happened in 1798, in consequence of an accumulated weight of water, occasioned by violent floods.<sup>26</sup>

The windmill turned out to be, in the fen historian H. C. Darby's memorable phrase, "but a wayward operator."<sup>27</sup> In 1805, Young himself acknowledged that "the windmills have been

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<sup>24</sup> Defoe, *A Tour thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 1748, III:26.

<sup>25</sup> Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lincoln* (London: Bulmer et. al, 1799), 235.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas Stone, *Review of the Corrected Agricultural Survey of Lincolnshire, by Arthur Young* (London: Cawthorn, British Library, 1800), 142.

<sup>27</sup> Darby, 220.

known to remain idle for two months together, and at seasons when their work is most wanted."<sup>28</sup> The civil engineer Joseph Glynn would later paint a memorable picture of the lamentable state of the "Fen farmer," who "in despair, watched their motionless arms, and earnestly hoped a breeze might spring up to catch their sails, whilst his fair fields gradually disappeared below the rising waters."<sup>29</sup> It was not until the late 1820s and early 30s that steam would provide a power that could be commanded "at will."<sup>30</sup>

Following the infamous deluge of 1798, the Proprietors of Lands at Deeping Fen consulted the pioneering civil engineer Sir John Rennie the Younger, who recommended both a program of repairs to the river outfalls and the installation of steam-powered engines.<sup>31</sup> With a finer understanding of both the scientific and human aspects of engineering projects, Rennie recommended retaining the use of scoop-wheels because it was "quite familiar to fen men" who were consequently more likely to "keep it in order."<sup>32</sup> Rennie's ideas would eventually transform the region as a whole, but his plans for decades remained little more than that: plans. In 1818, Rennie was commissioned for a second time to survey Deeping Fen, which he found had practically reverted into (in his own words) "almost a lost state."<sup>33</sup> When Clare went to visit his aunt's house at Peakirk, Deeping Fen likely continued to resemble an

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<sup>28</sup> Young, "Editor on Paring and Burning," *Annals of Agriculture, and other Useful Arts*, vol. 43 (1805): 569.

<sup>29</sup> Joseph Glynn, "Draining Land by Steam Power," *Transactions of the Society, Instituted at London, for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce*, vol. 51 (1836-37): 16.

<sup>30</sup> Anon, quoted in Darby, 222

<sup>31</sup> Miles, 18-19.

<sup>32</sup> Sir John Rennie the younger, quoted in Summers, 168.

<sup>33</sup> Rennie, 1819 Report to the Proprietors of Lands at Deeping Fen, quoted in W. H. Wheeler *A History of the Fens of South Lincolnshire; Being a Description of the Rovers Witham and Welland and their Estuary, and an Account of the Reclamation, Drainage and Enclosure of the Fens Adjacent Thereto*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (London: Simpkin, 1897), 329.

extensive wetland supporting a local economy based on wildfowling, fishing and summer grazing on what remained of the unenclosed commons.

It was not until 1824 that two steam-powered engines with scoop-wheels were installed at Pode Hall.<sup>34</sup> Glynn, who oversaw the manufacture and installation of the two engines, paid tribute to Rennie and other predecessors:

I have been able to realize what these great men had imagined; and in so doing, I have not only caused "two blades of grass to grow where but one great before," but I have had the pleasure to see abundant crops of wheat take the place of the sedge and the bulrush. . . . when it is known by what comparatively small means the swamp or marsh, exhaling malaria, disease, and death, may be converted into fruitful corn-fields and verdant pastures, the blessings of health and abundance may be still more widely spread.<sup>35</sup>

Glynn stood upon the shoulders of giants, able to "realise" what Rennie and others could only previously imagine. Citing Glynn, Darby suggests that "by 1825 Deeping Fen had been 'effectually drained by two steam-engines of 60 and 80 horse power,'" but the engines do not appear to have been in operation until two years later in 1827.<sup>36</sup> Whatever the precise timing, the impact of Glynn's improvements is clear: according to the logbook of John Trickett, superintendent of the steam engines at Pode Hole, in 1830 alone the new machines lifted over 25,000,000 tons of water out of Deeping Fen.<sup>37</sup> Following Glynn's success at Deeping Fen, steam-pumps were installed at Middle Fenn, Magdalen Fen, Binnimoor Fen and innumerable

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<sup>34</sup> Miles, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Glynn, 6.

<sup>36</sup> Darby, 224; Glynn, 14; Miles, 23.

<sup>37</sup> 20.

other sites across the fens.<sup>38</sup> Undoubtedly a "turning point" in land reclamation projects, the arrival of steam-power fatefully coincided with Clare's flitting to Northborough in the spring of 1832.<sup>39</sup>

Steam irrevocably altered both the ecological and social fabric of the region. The small cluster of villages in the Lower Welland Valley (Helpston, Glington, Peakirk and Northborough) each operated according to the "open-field" system delineated by Barrell, in which waterways played a critical role.<sup>40</sup> Within Clare's lifetime, steam-power ushered in a "more modern system of husbandry":

*Deeping Fen*, about 25,000 acres, north of the River Welland, lying between Spalding and Market Deeping, has now a very good steam drainage with the exception of about 4,000 acres in the lowest part, although the surface has subsided at least two feet in drying. . . . It is nearly all arable, - the fallow crop coleseed, occasionally turnips; the corn crops wheat and oats, alternated with clover and seeds. Wild as was its former condition of wet grazing ground producing a rank coarse fodder, Deeping Fen has now acquired celebrity for its enterprising managers.<sup>41</sup>

The "wet grazing grounds" of the commons were drained and turned into "nearly all arable." By the 1850s, coleseed, turnip and corn crops dominated roughly 80% of the formerly "wild" Deeping Fen. When Clare flitted to Northborough in the spring 1832, he would have

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<sup>38</sup> Darby, 224.

<sup>39</sup> Summers, 162-82.

<sup>40</sup> Barrell, 108-9.

<sup>41</sup> John Algernon Clarke, *Fen Sketches: Being A Description of the Alluvial District Known as The Great Level of the Fens, with a Brief History of its Progressive Improvements in Drainage and Agriculture* (London: Hall, Virtue, 1852), 252.

encountered a landscape that was being transformed and presided over by a new generation of "enterprising managers."

### **"& All is Nakedness & Fen"**

Barrell famously used maps to illustrate how the landscape of Helpston was altered by enclosure, but there is no map extant to chart the biodiversity loss that followed the transfiguration of Deeping Fen into "nearly all arable."<sup>42</sup> We have no complete or infallible record of what was lost, though the scale of it may be glimpsed in natural historical works written before and after the arrival of steam. Passing through the fens in the late eighteenth century, the naturalist Thomas Pennant declared he had "never met with a finer field for the zoologist to range in": he detailed at length both the variety and number of waterfowl that continued to flock and feed along the canals of the "imperfectly drained" fens, with black terns gathering in "vast flocks" that "almost deafen one in their clamours."<sup>43</sup> In his *History of British Birds* (1837-43), William Yarrell attributed the declining number of waterfowl to "the progress of draining, and the consequent extension of agriculture."<sup>44</sup> The presence of the bittern could no longer be "reckoned on" as a regular occurrence, following the draining of swampy "retreats congenial to its habits."<sup>45</sup> By the end of the century, the bittern, the large copper butterfly and countless other "fen wonders" were extinct or significantly reduced in

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<sup>42</sup> Barrell, 102, 107; Clarke, 252.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Pennant, *A Tour in Scotland, 1766* (Chester: Monk, 1771), 9-10.

<sup>44</sup> William Yarrell, *A History of British Birds*, 3 vols (London: Van Voorst, 1843), III:169; serialised in instalments from 1837.

<sup>45</sup> II:476.

England - a loss that modern ecologists in large part attribute to the destruction of wetland habitats greatly accelerated by steam.<sup>46</sup>

Writing in the late 1830s and early 40s, Yarrell noted that the ruff had been "very numerous" in Pennant's times, but cites subsequent reports that the bird had become "much more scarce" after "a large tract of the fens was drained and enclosed"; naturalists had come to expect that the species "would probably, as agriculture increased, be entirely driven from the island."<sup>47</sup> The black tern had filled the skies with their clamors in Pennant's times; within a few decades, those seemingly inexhaustible flocks had been reduced to "a few straggling pairs" scattered about Crowland and elsewhere, as their once extensive breeding grounds were "broken up."<sup>48</sup> For Margaret Grainger, Clare's "passion for living nature" distinguishes him from Yarrell and other mid-nineteenth-century scientists; whatever the case may be, differences in tone and approach likely derive from the steep decline of both the number and variety of forms of "living nature" to be found in the region by the late 1830s.<sup>49</sup> The extent of that loss, and the relatively short space in which it occurred, brings a new and sobering significance to Clare's lament that "nature herself seems on the flitting" ("Decay, A Ballad," *MP* IV:4).

There is also no map to convey the sheer visual shock of a landscape pared back to the bare soil. In her pioneering chapter on Clare's wetlands in *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (2008), Bridget Keegan takes her title from Clare's line "& all is nakedness & fen" ("The Fens," *MP* V:98). The quotation is presumably intended to support Keegan's argument that Clare wrote "lovingly" about an otherwise "almost universally

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<sup>46</sup> Rotherham, 104.

<sup>47</sup> Yarrell, II:575.

<sup>48</sup> III:414.

<sup>49</sup> See Grainger's comments in *NHPW*, 122 and xlv.

despised wetland ecosystem."<sup>50</sup> But the line is tinged with sorrow. It concludes a stanza in which Clare surveys a landscape dominated by the "crowded growth of wheat and beans" as any offending patch of "swarthy grass" is "quickly marred / The plough soon turns it into brown" ("The Fens," *MP V*:71, 76-7). For Clare, "nakedness" denotes a landscape denuded of its flora and fauna, by the ravages of winter and the "triumphs" of the plough ("The Fens," *MP V*:74). And it denotes a landscape in the process further stripped of the poet's memories and associations: "the stream it is a naked stream / Where we on Sundays used to ramble" ("Decay, A Ballad," *MP IV*:45-6).

Critics have debated whether it is nature itself or the poet's vision that is "on the wane" in Clare's Northborough poems, but the blurring of the two is surely key ("Decay, A Ballad," *MP IV*:9).<sup>51</sup> Clare's poetry changes with the landscape that inspired it. The "haunts" of "poesy" are lost in a double sense, both physically altered and consequently also drained of the boyish wonder and delight that enkindled Clare's first feelings for poetry: "gone gone is raptures flooding gushes" ("Decay A Ballad," *MP IV*:50, 54). To understand the style and form of Clare's Northborough writings (and why they are different from his earlier works), we have to understand how the face of nature itself was changing as the combined result of enclosure and steam. Seasons came and went as always, but they would have looked, sounded and felt different, both in actuality and to Clare personally or emotionally: "Spring comes & goes & comes again / & all is nakedness & fen" ("The Fens," *MP V*:97-8). In one of the most haunting lines of his poetry, the poet describes the changes he had lived through, both inwardly and outwardly: "the summer like a stranger comes / I pause & hardly know her face" ("The Flitting," *MP III*:3-4).

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<sup>50</sup> Bridget Keegan, *British Labouring-Class Nature Poetry, 1730-1837* (London: Palgrave, 2008), 149.

<sup>51</sup> See White, 55-6.

## "Autumn"

"Autumn hath commenced her short pauses of showers calms & storms & sunshine & shadow," Clare's essay begins (*NHPW*, 329). The opening reflects Clare's preoccupation in this late work with different kinds of returning, both the cycle of the seasons and his own revisiting of the scenes of his boyhood. The long, but quick-paced and broken-up description is also in keeping with a tension in Clare's writing between change and eternity, as the ever-varying colors of light and shade pass over the low-lying levels of the fens stretching endlessly on to the horizon. It further obliquely hints at the complexities and fluctuations of the poet's mood and feelings, in what Clare elsewhere describes as "seasons of the mind" ("Aye hopes & fears hath many hues," *MP* V:5). Most poignantly, the essay recalls in richly suggestive ways the works of poetic predecessors and contemporaries that Clare had long since outlived, most especially one of his favourite poems, John Keats's ode "To Autumn" (1819).

Seasons are a marker of renewal, but also of change and loss: the reshaping of the landscape and the complex structures of feeling it consequently came to awaken in Clare. Recently returned from the Epping Forest asylum, a sadly altered Clare retraces his steps across a sadly altered fenland: he makes his way from Northborough towards Deeping Gate, then west along the North Drain towards Lolham Bridges, to the north of Helpston, and finally turns to Waldram Hall, a local landmark neighboring his aunt's house at Peakirk.<sup>52</sup> Words and ways of seeing, noticing and responding to the landscape in the poetry of Keats and others linger indelibly in Clare's prose, but they also change and acquire new resonances in this later stage in the life of the poet and the landscape itself. Tracing this pattern of allusions offers insights into how Clare developed and adapted his style as he

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<sup>52</sup> Grainger details the walks included in "Autumn" in *NHPW*, 328.



responded to a landscape disfigured or marred by gain. More broadly, it sheds light on how the themes and aesthetic of Romanticism continue to develop in both literary and critical responses to the environmental crises of later generations.

Clare and Keats never met in person, but they shared a publisher and, "most importantly," as John Goodridge rightly judges, "studied each other's poems."<sup>53</sup> Paul Chirico notes that a great deal has been written about the artistic differences between them, especially regarding how they represented nature: Keats reportedly felt that "the Description too much prevailed over the sentiment" in Clare's poetry, while Clare critiqued the London poet's tendency to describe "nature as she . . . appeared to his fancys & not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he describes" (*LJC*, 38, 519).<sup>54</sup> Clare's descriptive style has been read as a response to Keatsian abstractions, but this familiar point of contrast seems increasingly outworn and reductive: it does not do justice to Keats's sensory responsiveness as "a child of nature warm & wild" (as Clare wrote, approvingly), but it also simplifies Clare, whose descriptive poetry is nonetheless loaded with visions, fancies and animating terms (*LJC*, 80).<sup>55</sup> Through his engagement with Keats, Clare in "Autumn" develops his understanding of this entanglement of outer and inner worlds, the altered fenland and the altered mind.

Clare liked it when Keats personified nature. In a letter to his editor, James Hessey, he singles out for praise a few "striking" lines from Keats's volume, *Lamia* (1820):

*"Season of mists & mellow fruitfulness;*

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<sup>53</sup> John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 62.

<sup>54</sup> Paul Chirico, "Late Reading: John Clare and John Keats" in *Keats's Reading / Reading Keats*, ed. Beth Lau, Greg Kucich and Daniel Johnson (London: Palgrave, 2022), 219.

<sup>55</sup> For example, see Hugh Haughton's assessment of Clare's response to Keats in "Progress and Rhyme: "The Nightingale's Nest in Romantic Poetry" in *John Clare in Context*, 51-86.

"Then in a wailful choir *the small gnats mourn*"

Autumn

"& joy *whose hand is ever at his lips*

"*Bidding adieu*"

Mel:

"No stir of air was there

"Not so much life as on a summers day

"Robs not *one light seed from the featherd grass*

"But *where the dead leaf fell there did it rest*"

Hyp:

"A stream went *voiceless by*"

Hyp:

- "let the maid

"Blush keenly as with some *warm kiss surprisd*"

Hyp:

"& poplars & lawn shading palms & beach

"In which *the zepher breaths its loudest song*"

Hyp: (*LJC*, 81)

In contrast with the pedantic critic that Clare lambasts as armed with "his pruning knife" and overly concerned with how long or short a poem should be (*LJC*, 81), Clare recognized

Keats's ability to pick out little, overlooked beauties: the sound the wind makes when blowing through poplar, palm and beech trees, a perfectly still day in which the breeze "robs not *one light seed from the featherd grass*." Keats demonstrates a heightened sensory awareness, but also personifies, animates and thoughtfully captures the mood or feeling awakened by these sensory impressions: the hum of small insects that seem to "wail" and "mourn" the passing of their own short summer lives as the autumn months set in. As his quotation from Keats's "Ode on Melancholy" further suggests, Clare was drawn to Keats's wider reflections on how pleasures may be enhanced by pain, moments of joy intensified by their loss. In his response to the altered fens of 1841, Clare poignantly develops this concept of "*joy whose hand is ever at his lips | Bidding adieu*."

It is no surprise that Keats's ode "To Autumn" struck a note with Clare, as his many plays upon its wording and imagery throughout his poetry affirm. The final stanza of Keats's ode echoes through Clare's writings:

Where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?

Think not of them, thou hast thy music too -

While barrèd clouds bloom the soft-dying day,

And touch the stubble-plains with rosy hue;

Then in a wailful choir the small gnats mourn

Among the river shallows, borne aloft

Or sinking as the light wind lives or dies;

And full-grown lambs loud bleat from hilly bourn;

Hedge-cricket sing; and now with treble soft

The red-breast whistles from a garden-croft;

And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.<sup>56</sup>

Keats's lines resonated in particular ways with Clare: he composed several poems celebrating the peculiar "music" of the season, including the "under notes" of the autumn robin that are drowned out in springtime by the "far famed" song of the nightingale in ways that foreshadow Clare's own shifting status in the literacy canon ("The Autumn Robin," *MP* III:89, 97). In poem after poem, Clare also draws to a close with own distinctive - and infinitely more precise - rendering of the sounds of birds, perhaps most memorably a sonnet that concludes with the robin's "hollow tut" ("The fire tail tells the boys when nests are nigh," *MP* V:14). Both poets give birds the last word, as they play on and with poetic closure. They end with sounds beyond human ken: they resist direct moral or philosophical commentary, though they herald the changing of the seasons with their recurring cycle of death and rebirth, fear and hope. Recalling Keats's lines in 1841, Clare came to develop a far more chastened view of an embattled natural process in which seasons come and go, but look, sound and feel eerily different. And his experiences would make Keats's words resonate differently too: "where are the songs of Spring? Ay, where are they?"

### **"Time Makes Strange Work with Early Fancys"**

In his ground-breaking essay "How Green were the Romantics?" (1986), Ralph Pite noted the essential problematics of ecocritical approaches in which the poetry of Wordsworth, Keats and Clare himself has been repeatedly "invoked to support any number of different versions of ecology."<sup>57</sup> Clare's essay offers insights into the processes by which writers and critics continue to invoke and reinterpret the poetry of an earlier epoch as they reckon with the

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<sup>56</sup> John Keats, "To Autumn" in *Complete Poems*, ed. John Barnard (London: Penguin, 2006), 23-33.

<sup>57</sup> Ralph Pite, "How Green were the Romantics?" *Studies in Romanticism*, vol. 35, no. 3 (Fall, 1996), 357.

ecological crises of later times. In "Autumn," there are moments where Clare's tone and stance seem hearteningly familiar. He found pleasure in seeking out little things, and the habit was with him still when he surveyed the altered fenland in 1841:

here is a drove leads us on its level sward right into the flaggy fens shaded on each side with whitehorn hedges covered with awes of different shades of red some may be almost called red-black others brick red & others nearly scarlet like the coats of the fox hunters - now we have a flaggy ditch to stride which is almost too wide for a stride to get over - a run & jump just lands on the other side. (*NHPW*, 329-30)

Clare does not step back to survey the landscape, but, in his old familiar style, takes us straight into it: he sees the landscape up close, noting the colors of the awes in the hedges (red-black, brick red, nearly scarlet). This way of seeing and noticing challenges longstanding and pejorative descriptions of the fens as bare, flat or monotonous in character ("nothing but a dull line of ponds," as the poet's editor memorably described his initial impressions of the region).<sup>58</sup> It also suggests a different kind of relationship between the poet and the landscape he describes. Clare does not observe from the elevated perspective frequently adopted by "the polite author" who, in Adam Potkay's judgment, "presumes to control through artful arrangement the physical and social landscape that he surveys."<sup>59</sup> Clare is not separate from, but irrevocably a part of the world he describes. And he can hardly be seen as master of his environment: he must work his way round flaggy ditches, though "a run & jump" lands him safely on the other side.

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<sup>58</sup> John Taylor, quoted in *John Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (London: Taylor & Francis), 406.

<sup>59</sup> Adam Potkay, "Ear and Eye: Counteracting Senses in Loco-descriptive Poetry" in *A Companion to Romantic Poetry*, ed. Charles Mahoney (London: Blackwell, 2011), 178.

The immediacy of Clare's writing has long been recognized as a technique skilfully developed by the poet, but his resolute focus on the present moment seems more strained in these late writings: he observes the changing colors of the foliage, though such attentiveness paradoxically implies an awareness of how these shades, like his own rendering of them, may fade away unnoticed.<sup>60</sup> Clare's focus on little details has been read to reflect the poet's sympathy with things overlooked, but in this later context littleness seems further suggestive of scarcity in a world where nature survives in hedgerows and flaggy ditches.<sup>61</sup> There is a hint of a threat in intermittent references to foxhunters and gunmen throughout the essay, which at once endanger and enhance the poet's appreciation of present joys. As Clare elsewhere indicates, this ability to focus on the present offered him relief from both memories of the past and the uncertainties of the future: "its a good method of providence in giving no distance in her pictures," he writes, "painting the present & stopping the eye with darkness from seeing further - it saves 100s of heartaches - it gives 100s of pleasant sensations as we always hope for the best before she draws up her curtain" (*LJC*, 186).

"Stopping the eye" becomes a more deliberate tactic in his late writings. Whenever Clare catches sight of church spires in the distance, his prose becomes laden with memories and "100s of heartaches":

tis pleasant as I have done to day to stand upon a length of Bridges & notice the objects around us there is the fine old Northborough castle peeping through the scanty foliage of orchards & thorn hedges & there is the beautifull Spire of Glinton Church towering high over the grey willows & dark wallnuts still lingering in the church yard

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<sup>60</sup> Weiner, 24.

<sup>61</sup> Gorji, "John Clare and the Triumph of Little Things" in *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1780-1900*, ed. Gorji and Kirstie Blair (London: Palgrave, 2013), 78-9.

like the remains of a wreck telling where their friends foundered on the ocean of time - place of green Memorys & gloomy sorrows – even these meadow arches seem to me something of the beautiful having been so long a prisoner & shut up in confinement they appear something worthy of notice. (332)

The word "pleasant" seems out of place here, given that many of the things Clare describes seem far from pleasing in any obvious or unambiguous sense: it rings hollow, flat and inadequate, unable to express much about either the place itself or the poet's feelings towards it. As he repeats "pleasure" and "beauty" here and throughout his writings, Clare seems to dwell upon their meaning, thinking them over and testing out the notions of aesthetic pleasure they inspire. The repetition is itself suggestive of certain Romantic ideas about taste: an ability to lift "the film of familiarity" and find pleasure in everyday things, tragically heightened by Clare's own recent "confinement" at Epping Forest.<sup>62</sup> The familiar sight of Glinton spire enkindles memories of childhood joys, but it also serves as a reminder of loss. The past frames the present, but the present also casts its shadows retrospectively back upon the past as the churchyard becomes a "place of green Memorys & gloomy sorrows." Clare knew he could never go back, just as modern ecocritical readings of Romanticism will inevitably be tintured with the shadows cast by our own calamitous epoch.

When Clare approaches Lolham Bridges, the landscape grows animated, imbued with feeling: trees are "peeping" above and below the arches of the viaduct (334). Clare's personifications often capture a certain characteristic perceptible in the thing itself (the way the branches of a tree seem to peer round an archway), but they also signal the mood of the poet when observing scenes which, in his own phrase, "animate my feelings" (336). Almost

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<sup>62</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley, "A Defence of Poetry" in *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 698.

in the very moment Clare utters the old familiar name Lolham Bridges, these boyish visions disperse, and the place seems suddenly unfamiliar and devoid of life: "time makes strange work with early fancys" (334). Characteristically, Clare leaves it uncertain whether the change comes from something external or from within: "the ponds that used to seem so large are now no bigger then puddles & as for fish I scarcely have enough interest to walk around them to see if there are any" (334). The use of scale is ambiguous: water levels may be empirically measured, but scale is also subjective (the ponds that seemed "so large" to the boy have shrunk to scarcely more than "puddles" to the man). Clare is forever blurring the boundaries between the altered landscape and the altered mind. As he elsewhere reflects on this symbiotic relationship between the naked branches of trees in winter and his own worsening circumstances (social, economic and personal): "distress is theirs - & they resemble me."<sup>63</sup> What is striking is Clare's lack of "interest": the lack of any emotional response, which further diminishes any curiosity or inquisitiveness regarding the facts of the matter (the presence, or absence, of fish). The practice of noticing was a source of pleasure for Clare, but it would have also inevitably sharpened his awareness of environmental degradation. As Aldo Leopold would later describe the condition of the naturalist, they live in a "world of wounds" that only they can see.<sup>64</sup>

Many of Clare's finest writings about the fens immediately take us away from a highly misleading, though stubbornly persisting notion of wetlands as *wild* places (whether

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<sup>63</sup> Clare, "To a Winter Scene" in *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ed. Erin Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon: 1989), I:14.

<sup>64</sup> Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac and Sketches Here and There* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 197.



we interpret such wildness in a positive or negative light, as an example of unspoiled nature or unimproved *waste*):

I will take the path down the north bank its green slopes look so pleasant tho the wind blows chilly & the rustics face looks purple with cold - men are occupied in cutting the weeds from the drains to make a water course for the autumn . . . rains - solitary persons are sideing up the hedges & thrusting the brushwood in the thin places & creeps which the swine made from one ground or field into another & stopping gaps made in harvest by gleaners & labourers. (332-3)

This is a laboriously managed place, but one that is nonetheless proving difficult to manage: livestock and laborers have made gaps in the hedges while passing from one field to another in the bustling harvest season, while weeds choke or obstruct the drains and the "autumn rains" carry with them the annual risk of flooding. This is not by any means a wild place, but the risk of flooding is suggestive of natural forces that continue to resist and defy human efforts to subdue the fenland. And for Clare, therein lies its wildness.

He begins to pick out the plants, animals and birds that are forever crossing the drains and property lines that divide the landscape: "now a snipe with its pointed wings hurries up from the meadow dyke in the fields" (334). Clare's description of the bird may be contrasted with that in his earlier poem, "To the Snipe": this is no "lover of swamps" seeking much-needed security in a remote wetland wilderness where humans fear to tread ("To the Snipe," *MP IV:1*). Instead, we have a startled and even rather comical figure seen hurrying up "from the meadow dyke" and into the neighboring fields. This is no bird of the wilderness, but one that finds its home here, in amongst the dykes, drains and residual patches of wildness. Quickening with an old pulse of pleasure, Clare goes on to detail at length the variety of life still to be found "in these flats & meadows" (334):

in the fen greensward closes the pewet or lapwing may be seen in flocks of two or three hundred together about Waldram Hall dabbling on the hedges of the lakes left by the rains - it is pleasing to see the woods of osiers by the river side fading yellow There are a few willow trees by the Hall or Cottage - where the crows sit in the old nests as if it was spring though perhaps they may do it to get from the cold for there is a little crizzling ice on the edges of the water in some places such as ruts & horsefeetings. (335)

Clare is approaching Waldram Hall, just north of his aunt's house at Peakirk. But the surrounding landscape has changed and remains in a state of flux. The "fen greensward closes" are betwixt and between (grass-covered grounds reclaimed from the fen), while the land in other places appears to be reverting back into its original fenny state. Clare repeatedly disrupts the boundaries between one kind of terrain and another, land and water ("fen greensward closes," "woods of osiers"), while alliterative patterns reaffirm this sense of a world that is always connected and always changing ("lakes left by the rains"). If "Autumn" is a response to Keats's ode, it should be remembered that Clare is describing a landscape characterised by scarcity as opposed to rank abundance or "*mellow fruitfulness*." We do not see here quite the same kind of confidence in the cycle of the seasons and rejuvenation of nature. Instead, we have a later, more subdued, but also, in a sense, more profound kind of pleasure derived from these few scattered signs of nature's "crizzling" resilience. Clare has seemed to "strike a more urgent and insistent note" in his later writings, but such readings overlook a profound inward resilience hard-won and directly derived from a similarly embattled, but still surviving natural world.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Tim Chilcott, *"A Real World and Doubting Mind": A Critical Study of the Poetry of John Clare* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1985), 108.

Significantly, Clare draws to a close by turning to the marks of human industry:

now here is a stile partitioning off sombodys portion of the bank but the middle rail is off so I stoop under to get through instead of climbing over it - there is a pair of harrows painted red standing on end against the thorn hedge & in another ground an old plough stands on its beam ends against a dotterel tree sometimes we see a roll lying in on one corner & broken trays & an old gate off the hooks waiting to be repaired till repairs are useless - even these rustic implements & appendages of husbandry blend with nature & look pleasing in the fields. (334-5)

Clare draws his readers into the moment of the here and now, but that moment is placed within a longer view of history. Clare could read the land and see the marks of human progress written upon it: the old plough standing on its beam reflects the demise of traditional modes of husbandry familiar to Clare from childhood. The stile "partitioning off somebody's portion of the bank" is a relic of changing property rights, though the poet is able to 'stoop under' to get through. The old gate "waiting to be repaired till repairs are useless" is animated, imbued with feeling and seeming to awaken a kind of sympathy from the poet, as a thing similarly abandoned and perhaps beyond repair. Crucially, these "rustic implements" begin to "look pleasing in the fields" at the moment they "blend with nature." Ploughs may be the mark of human "triumphs" over the land, but nevertheless they are, like Wordsworth's ruined cottage or Shelley's Ozymandias, inseparably a part of and therefore subject to larger natural processes of time and decay. The level fens stretching endlessly on towards the horizon gave Clare a particular view of eternity and man's diminished figure within it: great and small, high and low, old and new appendages of progress - each must inevitably return to that "great exhaustless blank that swallows all" ("Mystery," *MP* IV:7). That blank consumes particular times, places, things and individual identities, but it also offers a way to return to and 'blend

with nature." As Clare wrote to his son from the Northampton asylum in 1849, "I shall be glad to be out o' thought and out o' sight in the fens as usual" (*LJC*, 665). Clare could be 'out o' thought' in the fens in more ways than one: forgotten by others, but also thoroughly absorbed and immersed in the landscape in and about which he penned many of his finest works.

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