

ITS ONLY BONDAGE WAS THE CIRCLING SKY

JOHN CLARE AND THE ENCLOSURE OF HELPSTON

Several readers complained that we didn't mention the poet John Clare in our coverage of the Enclosures. To make amends, here is a celebration of that passionate defender of the commons, by John Felstiner.

I grew so much into the quiet love of nature's preserves that I was never easy but when I was in the fields passing my sabbaths and leisure with the shepherds and herdboys as fancys prompted sometimes playing at marbles on the smooth-beaten sheeptracks or leapfrog among the thymy molehills sometimes running among the corn to get the red & blue flowers for cockades to play at soldiers or running into the woods to hunt strawberries or stealing peas in churchtime when the owners were safe to boil at the gypsies fire who went half-shares at our stolen luxury we heard the bells chime but the field was our church.



a horde of songs by heart, so there was much singing at home. Eventually his mother stopped lighting the fire with scraps of paper she found stuffed in crannies, and encouraged his writing.

With little schooling but greatly self-taught, Clare worked around Helpston as a thresher with his father, as ploughboy, or pot-boy in an inn, or weeding, tending horses, gardening,

Running everywhere here, John Clare (1793-1864) tells his children about his own childhood in the village of Helpston and East Anglia's fen country. His early teens saw country landowners just beginning to mark out "preserves" for (hunting) game, so Clare says "nature's preserves" with some force. "In a strange stillness watching for hours the little insects climb up & down the tall stems of the wood grass," this son of a farm laborer and an illiterate mother learned lively loving attentiveness — we might be hearing a psalmist's praise of God's plenty. Victorian England would soon sponsor books of "Earth Lore for Children" to prime their Anglican faith. For Clare: "we heard the bells chime but the field was our church."

Catching it all with every sense, he leaves his children what legacy he can:

I often pulld my hat over my eyes to watch the rising of the lark or to see the hawk hang in the summer sky & the kite take its circle round the wood I often lingered a minute on the woodland stile to hear the woodpigeons clapping their wings among the dark oaks I hunted curious flowers in rapture & muttered thoughts in their praise I lovd the pasture with its rushes & thistles & sheep tracks I adored the wild marshy fen with its solitary hernshaw sweeing [heron swinging] along in its mellancholy sky I wandered the heath in raptures among the rabbit burrows & golden blossomd furze I dropt down on the thymy molehill or mossy eminence to survey the summer landscape as full of rapture as now

Clare's vigour, finesse, integrity, surprise, and joy have charmed Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, and for Pulitzer Prize-winner Carolyn Kizer he's "without doubt the most neglected greatest poet in our language". Edward Thomas, Galway Kinnell, Ted Hughes, Derek Walcott, Robert Hass single him out. What sort of writer is this, still scarcely noticed, who outsold Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats for a time?

At first laughed at by his parents, he "hit upon a harmless deception by repeating my poems over a book as though I was reading it this had the desired effect they often praised them & said if I could write as good I should do." His father had

shoemaking, lime-burning. He was an avid botanist and ornithologist, learned fiddling from the gypsies, and collected hundreds of local folk tunes. By husbanding a few shillings, at thirteen he purchased James Thomson's popular *The Seasons*, which inspired some poems of his own. When a local bookseller showed them to Keats's publisher, this led to a first book, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820). An instant hit, reprinted three times within the year, here was what Wordsworth had called for, "the real language of men in a state of vivid sensation," though Clare was seen more as a rustic wonder. He met the literati in London and aristocrats sponsored him, sometimes arriving in carriages at his cottage to call him in from the fields where he was busy reaping wheat. This cost him wages.

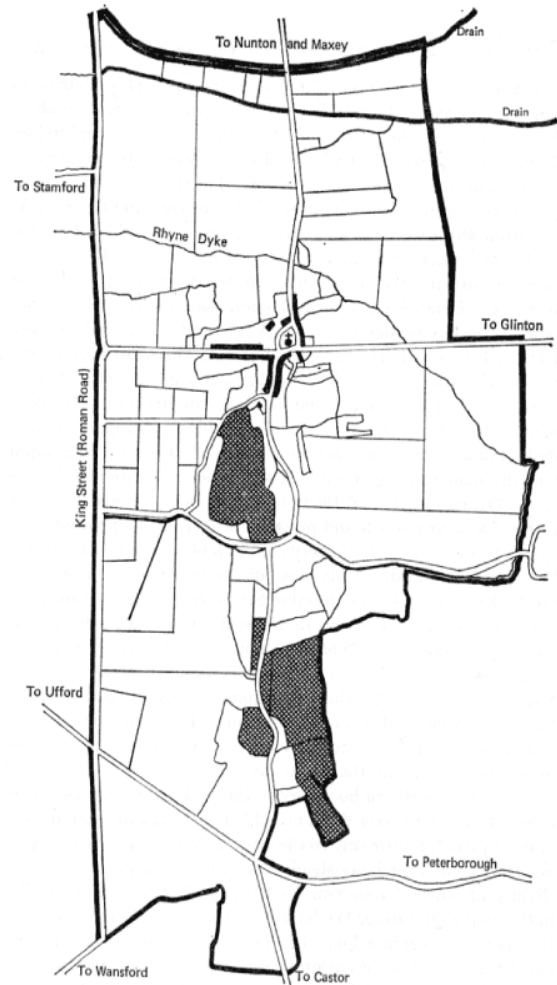
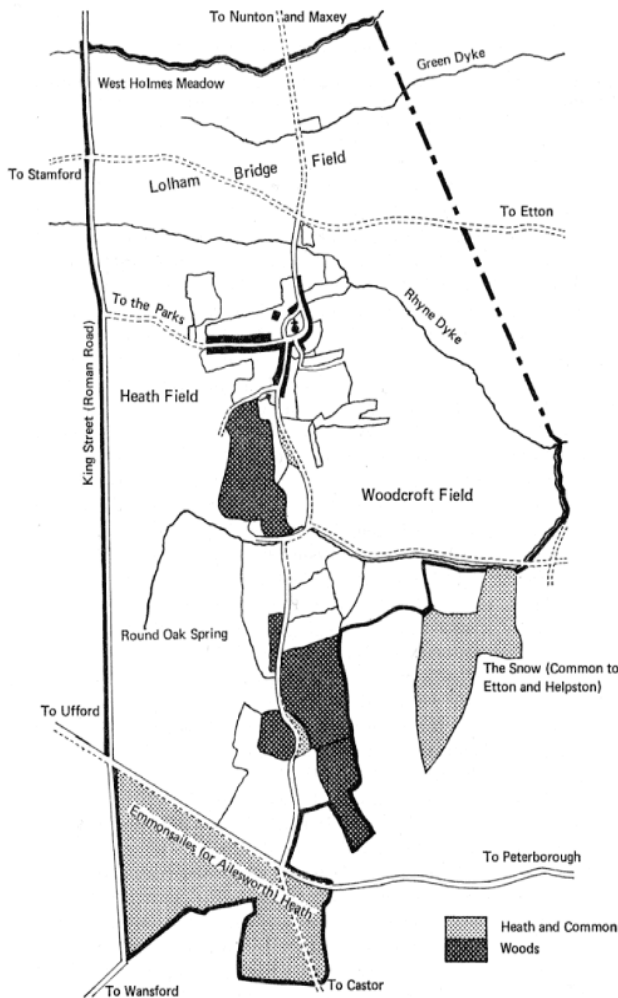
Though they never met, Clare had doubts about Keats, finding too many dryads and naiads in his woods: "In spite of all this his descriptions of scenery are often very fine but as it is the case with other inhabitants of great cities he often described nature as she appeared to his fancies and not as he would have described her had he witnessed the things he described." He must have liked the "last oozyngs hours by hours" of Keats's cider press, though, and his "stubble-plains". About Clare's verses, Keats said: "Images from Nature are too much introduced without being called for by a particular Sentiment." Clare's publisher wanted him to "speak of the Appearances of Nature . . . more philosophically."

More sentiment, more philosophy? That's just the point. Feeling and thought fuse in sheer description when Clare pulls his hat over his eyes to watch "the hawk hang in the summer sky" or drops down rapt "on the thymy molehill". It's true, his fine poems to autumn and the nightingale don't o'er-brim with tension like Keats's odes. But Clare has his music too, plus a unique firsthand energy.

Even an early unpublished poem, recalling childhood winter mornings, gets that energy into a loosely woven sonnet:

The schoolboys still their morning rambles take
To neighboring village school with playing speed

Helpston Before (left) and After Parliamentary Enclosure in 1809



The Characteristic sense of space which the topography and organization of an open field parish created was circular, while the landscape of parliamentary enclosure expressed a more linear sense . . . the village of Helpston is at the centre of the parish where the three fields of the parish come together: they form around the settlement a rough circle, which represents the area in which the villagers work and move.

John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840*

Loitering with pastimes leisure till they quake
Oft looking up the wild geese droves to heed
Watching the letters which their journeys make
Or plucking awes on which the fieldfares feed
And hips and sloes—and on each shallow lake
Making glib slides where they like shadows go
Till some fresh pastimes in their minds awake
And off they start anew and hasty blow
Their numbed and clumpsing fingers till they glow
Then races with their shadows wildly run
That stride, huge giants, o'er the shining snow
In the pale splendour of the winter sun.

Along with awkward inversions and rhymes, we get an indelible memory, “letters” made by “wild geese droves,” while “awes” (hawthorn berries) and “fieldfares” (thrushes) hold onto native English. So do “glib” — not flippant, as nowadays, but the original dialect for slippery — and “clumpsing,” numb with cold. (Clare added glossaries to his books.) When the school-boys “races with their shadows wildly run,” that clumsy inversion lets Clare’s clumpsing fingers dazzle us endlessly “In the pale splendour of the winter sun”.

Country sights merit the same care as celestial vision: “I used

to drop down under a bush & scribble the fresh thoughts on the crown of my hat as I found nature then” (if only that hat were in the British Museum). “I found the poems in the fields / And only wrote them down.” Instead of cheapening his craft, Clare’s humbleness deepens it. “The Nightingale’s Nest” leads us through 75 lines of seasonal change, boyhood excursions, and something beyond Keats’s ken: birdsong “Lost in a wilderness of listening leaves”! Through branches and brambles and nearby alarms we find the nest: no other bird

Uses such loose materials or weaves
Its dwelling in such spots—dead oaken leaves
Are placed without and velvet moss within
And little scraps of grass and, scant and spare,
What scarcely seem materials, down and hair.

Verifying a poet’s Eden, he actually counts the eggs and corrects his sense of their colour:

Snug lie her curious eggs in number five
Of deadened green or rather olive-brown,
And the old prickly thorn-bush guards them well.
So here we’ll leave them, still unknown to wrong,
As the old woodland’s legacy of song.

One breath takes those eggs and a thorn bush into the woodland's "legacy of song".

Clare had cause to look back longingly on "nature's preserves" where he grew up, "the lonely nooks in the fields & woods & my favorite spots . . . before enclosure destroyed them". When he was 16, Parliament passed an Act for the Enclosure of Helpston and neighbouring parishes. For centuries the village had lain among huge fields, woods, heath, and wasteland whose talismanic names spot Clare's prose and poems: Lolham Bridges, Oxey Woods, Woodcroft Field, Emmonsales Heath, Round Oak Spring, Swordy Well. Now barriers of all sorts enclosed the open common lands for private use, setting rectangular bounds on a world that once centred in Helpston and ranged out freely in the circle of a child's roving.

That "wandering scene" is gone, Clare says in "The Moors": "Its only bondage was the circling sky." The "wild pasture," the "commons wild and gay" of "my boyish hours / Free as spring clouds and wild as summer flowers," the "brook that dribbled on," the "sky-bound moors" are all blocked where "Fence now meets fence in owners' little bounds." Where "the field was our church" and there were

paths to freedom and to childhood dear
A board sticks up to notice "no road here,"

blocking body and spirit both. Wordsworth's seedtime may have fled, when "I bounded o'er the mountains," but he can still revisit the "wild secluded" cliffs above Tintern Abbey. Inspired by Oliver Goldsmith's "The Deserted Village", Clare feels politically as well as personally threatened:

Enclosure came and trampled on the grave
Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave.

It also closed off an encircling world that only "the horizon's edge surrounds."

A circle of wild intimate terrain, like a bird's rounded nest, both belong to that loss, and Clare knew his birds. His ongoing Natural History of Helpston records scores of species, many of them first sightings in his county. Again and again in his bird's-nest poems the word "snug" occurs, along with "safe" and "sheltered": "how snug" the lark's nest "in a horse's footing [footprint] fixed!" In "The Pettichap's Nest", featured by Jonathan Bate in *The Song of the Earth*, Clare finds this tiny warbler building "close by the rut-gulled waggon road," with no grass clump or thistle spears or prickly bush to shield it from sheep, horses, oxen. Lined with feathers and pea-sized eggs so delicate a "green grasshopper's jump might break the shells," her nest speaks for the Helpston poet, vulnerable, surviving, seeking a safe centre.

Animals, too, inhabit the circle John Clare flourished in. A grunting badger hunted by "dogs and men" turns and fights for hours, "tries to reach the woods," "sticks and cudgels" beat him,

He falls as dead and kicked by boys and men
Then starts and grins and drives the crowd again
Till kicked and torn and beaten out he lies
And leaves his hold and cackles, groans and dies.

Any moralizing would only weaken the spate of verbs driven by "and . . . and . . . and," by the shock of "grins" and "cackles" and that last line's falling cadence.

Before Fences Crept In . . .

Far spread the moorey ground a level scene
Bespread with rush and one eternal green
That never felt the rage of blundering plough
Though centurys wreathed spring's blossoms on its brow
Still meeting plains that stretched them far away
In unchecked shadows of green brown, and grey
Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene
Nor fence of ownership crept in between
To hide the prospect of the following eye
Its only bondage was the circling sky
One mighty flat undwarfed by bush and tree
Spread its faint shadow of immensity
And lost itself, which seemed to eke its bounds
In the blue mist the horizon's edge surrounds
Now this sweet vision of my boyish hours
Free as spring clouds and wild as summer flowers
Is faded all — a hope that blossomed free,
And hath been once, no more shall be
Inclosure came and trampled on the grave
Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave
And memory's pride ere want to wealth did bow
Is both the shadow and the substance now

Opening lines from *The Moors* by John Clare

Turning thirty, Clare had bouts of depression on top of poverty, seven children to feed, publishing troubles, anguish at enclosure, and an unwanted move from his birthplace. Though only three miles away, this displacement meant a loss of place, "Green fields and every pleasant place," "places known so long":

I miss the heath, its yellow furze
Molehills and rabbit tracks that lead
Through besom ling and teasel burrs
That spread a wilderness indeed

Hallucinations and depression send him to an asylum near London. Four years later he walks off the grounds one July morning and in cracked old shoes makes his way back home, over eighty miles in four days, lying down in sheds "with my head towards the north to show myself the steering point in the morning," living on grass, a tobacco chaw, and a pint of ale when someone tosses him a few pennies. At St. Ives he rests on a flint heap, at Stilton "I was compleatly foot-foundered & broken down."

After a few months, "homeless at home," he's confined to the Northampton General Lunatic Asylum for his last twenty four years. His wife never visits, but the asylum steward, William Knight, transcribes Clare's poems. All told, he wrote over 3,500. Those published during his lifetime were tidied up for the gentry, in grammar, spelling, punctuation, dialect. The keenest of them still tingle with detail and strike unforgettable notes: the moorland, whose "only bondage was the circling sky," the nightingale's song "Lost in a wilderness of listening leaves".

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John Felstiner, from Stanford University, is also author of *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu*, and *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew: Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*.