

CLARIFICATION

John Clare: Poems of the Middle Period, 1822 – 1837 Volume v., Edited by Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003)
£105.00

There is no accounting for Editors.

John Clare.

The publication of this long awaited work marks the completion of the Clarendon series, which began with publication of *The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837-1864*, edited by Robinson and Powell, in 1984. The significance of the series in promoting the presentation of John Clare as an accessible poet is impossible to overstate. The difficulty of reading Clare's MSS, which will be appreciated by anyone who has stared them in the face, and the size and complexity of his *oeuvre*, made a task of epic scale for Robinson, Powell, and Dawson. They followed a succession of editors whose work was incomplete and unreliable and a critical tradition which was patchy and often subjective. In the field of Clare editions, there was no consistent precedent to follow. Certainly, trends in Clare editing have combined to ensure that the optimism of his pre-publication days, 'good God, how great are my Expectations, what hopes do I cherish!' could not be sustained in the face of a fickle public and a commercial presentation which sought to mould critical response by emphasising difference. John Taylor, Clare's publisher and first editor, set the tone in his Introduction to *Poems Descriptive* in January, 1820:

The following Poems will probably attract some notice by their intrinsic merit; but they are also entitled to attention from the circumstances under which they were written. They are the genuine productions of a young Peasant, a day-labourer in husbandry, who has had no advantages of education beyond others of his class; and though Poets in this country have seldom been fortunate men, yet he is, perhaps, the least favoured by circumstances, and the most destitute of friends, of any that ever existed.

The critical response to Clare has always been heavily attenuated, partly by these early and persistent associations with naivety and novelty but also by the related assumption of the editors who took responsibility for his work, both during and after his life, that Clare could hardly be accounted one of the company of the great Romantic poets. Clare died in 1864, unrecognised and largely unpublished and it

was not until 1908 that Arthur Symons presented Clare in a way which treated him as a complex writer with something innovative and important to say, noting significantly that ‘what Clare actually wrote was better than what his editors made him write.’ Subsequently, Edmund Blunden and Geoffrey Grigson in particular, provided editions which paved the way for modern critical debate. The poetry itself became more exposed, J. W. Tibble producing in 1935 a two volume set of Clare’s work, a significant step in scholarship, though one which modulated Clare’s voice in its contemporisation of his punctuation and spelling. Since the 1960s, access to the poetry and prose has significantly increased and now encompasses this edition, though even this does not claim to be *The Compleat Clare*.

Work leading to the production of the Clarendon Edition effectively started when Geoffrey Summerfield and Eric Robinson came to the conclusion that, ‘no editor is ever likely to arrive at a completely satisfactory solution’ to the problems of producing Clare (1962). The reasons were many. No clear, reliable tradition of editing Clare existed. His manuscripts were a mess. There was a huge bulk of material, carelessly set down, idiosyncratically spelt and largely unpunctuated, sometimes on no more than scraps of paper. Often, more than one work appeared on the same cramped sheet. Clare’s home-made ink was corrosive, and ate its way through his paper. Summerfield and Robinson offered a daunting view of, ‘the apparent disorder of Clare’s creative processes which produced notes, poems, letters and anagrams all mixed together in a furious welter.’ (1964). They felt it important that a search to establish ‘true texts’ of Clare’s work should continue and pointed out that difficulties left by previous editors had made their task harder, ‘They have corrected his spelling, altered his punctuation, and have generally felt themselves entitled to adjust his texts wherever they have thought fit.’ Realistically, Eric Robinson has described his task as being to approach ‘closer to such truth as is attainable.’ Mark Storey, in the preface to his Clarendon volume of Clare’s endlessly fascinating letters, agrees that Robinson and Summerfield, ‘demonstrated the unreliability of the only evidence that, in the end, mattered – the received text of Clare’s work.’ (1985).

Transcribing Clare’s work has been a consistent editorial problem. John Taylor thought so:

I can find *no one* here who can perform the Task beside myself [...] the poems are not only slovenly written but as slovenly *composed*, & to make good

Poems out of some of them is a greater difficulty than I ever had to engage with.

The quality of the relationship between Taylor and Clare has had significant implications for all subsequent presentations of the poet's work. Robinson and Summerfield (1963) argued that deterioration in the two men's relationship was due, not to the state of Clare's manuscripts, a contention made potentially difficult to sustain following comments made about the manuscripts by the edition's editors over subsequent years, than to changes of heart on Taylor's part. It is important to remember that Clare was active at a time when the commercial 'real world' was changing. Perhaps Robinson and Summerfield focus too closely here on Taylor, who was aware of the declining market to which he was introducing Clare's work and had to position his business to meet the requirements of his public. Where do we draw the line which separates Taylor's vigorous editing of Clare's texts from Clare's yearning to be a published writer? Did Clare really approve of what was going on? Ostensibly, he did. He usually expressed approval of Taylor's emendations of his work, writing to him on 8 March, 1821, for example, 'I approve of most of your alterations as usual [...] do as you would with my approval [...] your taste is preferable to any I have witnessed and on that I rely.' Or, was this a tactic, an attempt to prolong the working of a relationship in which he was the junior partner, so that he could get something of what he wanted? It was a response which contrasted sharply with other directions to change, for example, to Taylor earlier that year on his patron, Lord Radstock's requirement that his work be amended: 'What he don't like he must lump as the dog did his dumpling.' And in an 1824 essay, published anonymously by *The European Magazine* in 1825, Clare noted '(Byron) thought of critics as a race of petty tyrants that stood in the way of genius.' We know that Taylor's pragmatic approach caused problems to other authors he published, including Keats, Hazlitt, Lamb, Hood, Landor and De Quincey. Although Taylor sometimes gave practical support to them, as he quite often did to Clare, he was capable of leaving them feeling unsupported professionally, as De Quincey asserted when he told him:

A great part of the difficulty I find in talking to you, is that you blend the two characters of a friend and a man of business. This distracts me, perplexes me, and takes away all unity of purpose.

In *The Later Poems of John Clare*, Robinson and Summerfield commented on these inadequacies in a discussion of Clare's editors from Taylor's day to 1964. Geoffrey Grigson was particularly censured, having, 'hit an all-time low for inaccuracy in his readings of Clare's poetry.' Significantly, they took the opportunity to make clear the editorial approach which they thought appropriate and largely used in editing the Edition, which the volume under review brings to a close:

We have published Clare exactly as he wrote, preserving his punctuation or lack of it, his capitalization and his spelling [...] we have done the minimum of rearrangement, and that for the rest we have not altered Clare's text, so that the reader may be assured that he is reading John Clare in his natural state and not John Clare scrubbed and spruced up for inspection by the Board of Guardians.

The Edition proper commenced in 1984, with the publication of the first of two volumes of *The Later Poems of John Clare, 1837-1864*, edited by Robinson and Powell. Some of Clare's later work was produced during his lifetime with the assistance of amanuenses, notably W. F. Knight, superintendent of Northampton asylum. This made for problems of its own. As the editors point out, these manuscripts were inconsistently punctuated. Robinson and Powell therefore decided to give their presentation consistency, for example, by making 'silent (i.e. unrecorded) changes in the matter of full stops to regularize the presentation of this edition.' Punctuation was again identified as a problem on publication of *The Early Poems of John Clare, 1804-1822* 2 vols., in 1989. The mature Clare was sparing with punctuation, but:

In some of his early poems [...] he fell into the opposite extreme, probably in response to suggestions 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 where it was clearly wrong but have provided the evidence of exactly what we have done.

A claim that Clare has been allowed to speak for himself is a brave one and credible in part but impossible to sustain across the range of any edition.

The volume under review, volume 5 of *Poems of the Middle Period* contains poems which Clare wrote or revised between 1822 and 1837. Perhaps most notable is the work he produced at Northborough (May, 1832 to July, 1837). The detail available to the series editors was not close enough for definitive dating to be made of all works which may have been written during that time. On *The Flitting*, v.3 of *PMP*, for

example, they offer the opinion that 'it is just possible that the poem may have been started when Clare was still in Helpston.' Geoffrey Summerfield dissents, saying that *The Flitting* and *Decay* 'were written after Clare's removal to Northborough.' Clare himself is unequivocal: 'I've left mine old home of homes' he says, and refers to 'my old home now left.'

In addition, volume 5 contains extensive corrections of work given previously in earlier volumes of this edition, as well as some additional poems and fragments. Three new works are added to *Early Poems* and twenty to *Poems of the Middle Period*, including two which the editors cannot ascribe with certainty to Clare: 'A vision cross'd me as I slept -' 'I knew thee in thy cloudless day,' and one, 'The daisy comes at early spring,' for which the editors have been unable to trace an MS, but which was associated by John Tibble (1935) with other material (given by the present editors in *PMP* 2) under the title *Beauty*. Eight new pieces are added to *Later Poems*, including four for which the editors have not been able to give a provenance. It is speculated that one, *To William Peel Nesbitt*, may be by Clare but is more likely to have been by W. F. Knight. Volume 5 also has a consolidated series glossary and consolidated lists of titles and first lines to the series, in addition to its own indexes. It contains 485 poems, 197 of them previously unpublished.

There are grounds for saying that this work is the best of Clare. The writing, particularly that produced toward the end of his time at Helpston and during his residence at Northborough, came at a time in his life which was crucial for many reasons. By then, Clare was a failure on the land and commercially as a writer. His health was chronically poor and he was seriously inhibited by anxiety. Though the poems are mainly magnificent and the best evidence we have that Clare was a major poet with an unmistakable poetic identity, we know that he also had to grapple with awareness that this identity would not be recognised and therefore could not be adequately expressed. Clare made four visits to London (1820, 1822, 1824 and 1828) during which he spent time in company with his literary peers and was delighted by their recognition of his work. This recognition had been widely and enthusiastically signalled with the publication of his 1820 work, but that success would never be repeated. For most of his life he had a strong sense of poetic identity but could never feel secure in it because it was so sparsely acknowledged. Often, he writes to explore his feeling that this is so. There are some familiar examples in volume 5: 'The worlds vain mouth is wide & opens more'; 'The world is taking little

heed' and 'World friendship thou art often but a garb'. There are examples amongst the newly published work, too: 'Ere the world [&] I were known'; 'Hath the world been but madness' and:

This world hath nought of substance or reality
But cares & troubles these alone take root
& thrive on every soil the rest are shadows
That mock our eyes with shapes of flowers & fruit
Hopes change like summer clouds from shape to shape
Joy smiles upon our fancys & grows mute
While < > expectation stands a gape
Listening in vain to catch its lulling tales

The editors try hard to define Clare as a Theist, and see in some of his work the 'inscape' of Gerard Manley Hopkins:

I wouldn't be the common song
For all the earth to shout & praise
But just a theme remembered long
By beauty in its sweetest days

The allusion to Hopkins is not particularly happy. Hopkins was more specific about his belief than Clare and in his use of 'inscape,' the essential attributes of things, as a poetic device. In *Hurrahing in Harvest*, for example, 'the outcome of half an hour of extreme enthusiasm as I walked home alone one day from fishing on the Elwy,':

I walk, I lift up, I lift up heart, eyes,
Down all that glory in the heavens to glean our Saviour;
And, eyes, heart, what looks, what lips yet gave you a
Rapturous love's greeting of realer, of rounder replies?

Clare's poetry is not confessional, but it is often revealing, often a cry for help. He is realistic about his creative position, particularly during the period covered by volume 5, when much of his work was reaction against reality.

The publication of volume 5 means that we now have the full range of Clare's work available for consideration in a consistent presentation, making it easier to see, for example, the editing history of Clare's work and how firmly a writer's role as creator is to be part of a process of multiple authorship which produces it. The production of Clare's texts was more tortuous than many and volume 5 will especially facilitate investigation of how Clare wrote and revised and the manner in which his writing style developed.