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### The outs and ins of 'Mad' John Clare

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## The outs and ins of 'Mad' John Clare

### Abstract

This year marks the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the death (20 May 1864) of English poet, 'Mad' John Clare, who died of a stroke, and was buried in Helpston, the village of his birth. Known in his time as a 'peasant poet' (a description he sometimes adopted himself), most of Clare's life centred on the East Midlands region of Northamptonshire, its villages, people, its fields, forests, waterways and byways.

Born in 1793, he wrote in a largely self-educated style. He was son of an agricultural labourer and his illiterate wife, and was educated in a village school until joining the workforce at the age of twelve as a rural labourer. But he could read and write, and recalled his 'first great book of any merit' being a copy borrowed in childhood of Robinson Crusoe. Fortuitously, at the age of thirteen, he bought a book of poetry and determined to become a poet.

### Keywords

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## THE OUTS AND INS OF 'MAD' JOHN CLARE

by Rowan Cahill

This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death (20 May 1864) of English poet, “Mad” John Clare, who died of a stroke, and was buried in Helpston, the village of his birth. Known in his time, and sometimes self-described, as a ‘peasant poet’, most of his life centred on the East Midlands region of Northamptonshire, its villages, people, its fields, forests, waterways, and byways.

Born in 1793, he wrote in a largely self-educated way, son of an agricultural labourer and his illiterate wife, educated in a village school until joining the workforce at the age of twelve as a rural labourer. But he could read, and write, and recalled his “first great book of any merit” being a copy borrowed in childhood of *Robinson Crusoe*. Fortuitously, at the age of thirteen, he bought a book of poetry and determined to become a poet.

He did so, and wrote about nature and the rural communities and people and culture and traditions of which he was part, railing against what was lost, and being lost, due to the process of enclosures and the privatisation of commonlands, a disruptive, traumatic ‘smothering’ as he saw it:

*Each little tyrant with his little sign  
Shows where man claims, earth glows no more divine.  
On paths to freedom and to childhood dear  
A board sticks up to notice ‘no road here’  
And on the tree with ivy overhung  
The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung  
As though the very birds should learn to know  
When they go there they must no further go.  
Thus, with the poor, scared freedom bade good-bye  
And much they feel it in the smothered sigh,  
And birds and trees and flowers without a name  
All sighed when lawless law’s enclosure came...*

In motion since the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the process of enclosures moved apace during Clare’s lifetime as capitalism rampantly concluded the transformation of rural populations into a rural working class, or the unemployed, or as industrialised exiles to the growing industrial cities and fodder for the alienations of the factories. Between 1750 and 1850, some six million acres of common land, open fields, meadows, waste lands, were enclosed and privatised.

Clare did not regard the past and this loss and transformation sentimentally in terms of some idealised Garden of Eden, but understood in a naïve, untutored, way that something akin to alienation was taking place and being manufactured by this dispossession. With regard to rural flora and fauna, he recognised that an equilibrium was being disrupted and that species that had developed an interdependence over time with one another and with traditional landforms and usages, were having their relationships broken, destroyed. There was, and is, an ecological dimension to Clare, historian E. P. Thompson referring to him as “a poet of ecological protest”.

With regard to human society, Clare saw forms of local peoples' cultures and traditions and celebrations and meanings and organisations being disrupted and/or swept away, and people becoming organised and enslaved in a way that was new and alien and unnatural, as a work and leisure culture based on seasons and the calendar was destroyed. In itself this was more than just 'culture'; Clare recognised intuitively that this sort of culture was in fact the bedrock of community—a social space where community was built away from, and independent of, 'masters' and the political system where

*Churchwardens Constables and Overseers  
Makes up the round of Commons and of Peers  
With learning just enough to sign a name  
And skill sufficient parish rates to frame  
And cunning deep enough the poor to cheat...*

Long thought of as a 'nature poet', Clare was also a political poet.

Despite inadequate writing materials, in a lifetime of writing Clare obsessively churned out some three and a half thousand poems, everything from short stanzas to long verse narratives, characterised by grammatical irregularities, the use of his regional dialect, erratic spelling, and mostly lacking punctuation and capitalisation. He found publishers and editors, with whom he argued, and books of his poems were published, and for a time he was known as the English Robert Burns. He also collected the culture that was being erased/destroyed, the folk songs, fiddle tunes, dances, customs, folklore, so that his work is now a rich repository of social history for researchers, as much as is the *Rural Rides* of the more celebrated documenter William Cobbett (1763-1835).

But he also became depressed, subject to hallucinations, maybe violent, as he lived his rural life, married, had seven children, watched some of them die, deriving his income from rural labouring, ploughing, lime-burning, gardening, writing, royalties, patronage, and experienced a sense of himself becoming an outsider within his village community as he made a literary name and sought to generate a literature-based income. He mixed briefly in visits to London with citified intellectuals/writers like Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas de Quincey, William Hazlitt, Charles Lamb, but he was not at home in the "City sulphurously grey".

From 1837 onwards Clare spent most of the remainder of his life in lunatic asylums, at times believing he was Lord Byron, whom he greatly admired. Modern diagnosticians have variously sourced his mental health problems to a work related head injury, malaria from the fens, and bipolar disorder. Whatever it was, it was probably exacerbated/induced by his deeply felt awareness of the destruction and dispossession he recognised as coming with enclosure, akin to the indigenous mental health traumas caused by colonialism identified by psychiatrist Frantz Fanon.

Traditionally Clare has made it into anthologies via his closely observed nature writing, evocative, fresh, immediate in their depictions of English rural flora and fauna, his poems creating a sense of nature and being as if the reader was seeing it in the 'here and now', wonderfully alive and bringing with it a restorative psychological energy. But this has tended to come at the expense of the political Clare, his politics

traditionally excised by editors until relatively recent times, and frowned upon by supporters at the time.

So why bother with this poetic voice today? He was no revolutionary, yet he was a critical voice, and there is an energising joy in hearing such voices in the silences of history, voices for whom dissent and criticism was natural and fluent, simply part of being, and in discovering amongst those like poet Clare, neutered over time by editorial surgeons, the dissident sinews of their singing.

And there could be a refreshing, incisive modernity, perhaps cynicism, to his observations. As he noted of the 'sameness' of the professional political classes of his time:

*The wigs and torys may be better classified perhaps by the terms outs & ins for be they wigs or torys in those situations the outs are always vociferators of 'liberty' 'cruelty of taxation' & 'good of the people' while the ins are inflexible tyrants & determined supporters of all that is oppressing & annoying to the people & benefiting to themselves & their connections*

Post-WW2, interest in Clare grew, particularly in the wake of the work of the 'history- from- below' historians, and increasing understandings of the impact of enclosures, and the nature and dimensions of 19<sup>th</sup> century rural dissent/opposition. Since the 1980s, critical interest in Clare has mushroomed. The full extent of his poetic achievement became progressively evident between 1984 and 2003 via publication of his complete works by Oxford University Press. Online there is an array of comment, analysis, specialist interest sites, and much of his poetry. For further reading see Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography*, Picador, London, 2003, and for Clare's politics, Alan Vardy, *John Clare, Politics and Poetry*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2003.