

TALKING ABOUT JOHN CLARE

RONALD BLYTHE



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TALKING ABOUT JOHN CLARE

Ronald Blythe

Talking About John Clare

Trent Editions

1999

By the same author

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The View in Winter

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Divine Landscapes

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Private Words: Letters and Diaries from the Second World War

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CONTENTS

PREFACE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABBREVIATIONS AND PRINCIPAL SOURCES

I. AN INHERITED PERSPECTIVE

II. 'SOLVITUR AMBULANDO': CLARE AND FOOTPATH WALKING

III. CLARE IN HIDING

IV. CLARE IN POET'S CORNER, WESTMINSTER ABBEY

V. CLARE'S TWO HUNDREDTH BIRTHDAY

VI. THE DANGEROUS IDYLL

VII. THE HELPSTON BOYS

VIII. THOMAS HARDY AND JOHN CLARE

IX. 'NOT VERSE NOW, ONLY PROSE!'

X. RIDER HAGGARD AND THE DISINTEGRATION OF CLARE'S WORLD

XI. EDMUND BLUNDEN AND JOHN CLARE

XII. PRESIDENTIAL FRAGMENTS

XIII. KINDRED SPIRITS

XIV. COMMON PLEASURES

INDEX OF NAMES

For R.S. Thomas

Preface

Out of love and respect, and fellow feeling, it is often poets themselves whose celebration of a particular writer points the rest of us to his worth. A poet friend introduced me to Sidney Keyes, and Keyes brought me to John Clare. When in 1982 Edward Storey and those involved in the creation of a John Clare Society asked me to be its President, I felt that my pleasure in this, our greatest English rural voice, had come full circle. For eighteen wonderful summers I have come to Helpston to talk about him, and for many years before this Clare crept into other lectures, a quiet genius who knew his place. Last year, 1998, Kelsey Thornton and John Goodridge invited me to collect up some of this talk and put it into a book. Editing it took me back to that long succession of July days in Helpston, and ever-increasing Clare companions, and to one of the best things which has happened to me as a writer, to be President of such a distinguished Society. Talks tend to roam—it is their nature—whilst essays keep their place on the page, so my Clare is digressive and associative, and deeply personal. He surprises us all by the riches which constantly appear as we read his work and remember his unenviable life. There is no end to him.

Ronald Blythe

Acknowledgements

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Abbreviations and Principal Sources

By Himself *John Clare By Himself*, ed. by Eric Robinson and David Powell (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-NAG and Carcanet, 1996)

Early Poems (I-II) *The Early Poems of John Clare*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger (two volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989)

Later Poems *The Later Poems of John Clare*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger (two volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984)

Letters *The Letters of John Clare*, ed. by Mark Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985)

Middle Period *John Clare, Poems of the Middle Period 1822-1837*, ed. by Eric Robinson, David Powell, and P.M.S. Dawson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, Vols I-II, 1996; Vols III-IV, 1998).

Natural History *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, ed. by Margaret Grainger (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983)

Prose *The Prose of John Clare*, ed. by J.W. and Anne Tibble (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1951, reprinted 1970)

Selected Poems and Prose *Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare*, ed. by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978)

Shepherd's Calendar *John Clare, The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. by Eric Robinson, Geoffrey Sumerfield, and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, revised edition, 1993)

Summerfield *John Clare, Selected Poetry*, ed. by Geoffrey Summerfield (London: Penguin, 1990)

CHAPTER I

An Inherited Perspective: Landscape and the Indigenous Eye

Inaugural lecture given at the Nobel Symposium to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Swedish Royal Society in September 1978. The Symposium was entitled 'The Feeling for Nature and the Landscape of Man'.

'Any landscape is a condition of the spirit,' wrote Henri-Frédéric Amiel in his *Journal Intime*. As a Swiss he could have been reproaching all those British intellectuals and divines who abandoned what their own country had to offer by way of transcendental scenery, the Lake District beginning to lose its efficacy as a spiritual restorative by the mid nineteenth century, for the Jungfrau and the Matterhorn. Any landscape is a condition of the spirit. A few months ago I happened to glance up from my book as the train was rushing towards Lincoln to see, momentarily yet with a sharp definition, first the platform name and then the niggard features of one of the most essential native landscapes in English literature, John Clare's Helpston. I had not realised that the train would pass through it, or that one could. It was all over in seconds, that glimpse of the confined prospect of a great poet, but not before I had been reminded that he had thrived for only as long as he had been contained within those flat village boundaries. When they shifted him out of his parish, although only three miles distant—and for his own good, as they said—he began to disintegrate, his intelligence fading like the scenes which had nourished it. Of all our poets, none had more need to be exactly placed than John Clare. His essential requirements in landscape were minimal and frugal, like those of certain plants which do best in a narrow pot of unchanged soil. I observed this tiny, yet hugely sufficient, world of his dip by under scudding clouds. A church smudge—and his grave an indefinable fraction of it—some darkening hedges, probably those planted after the Enclosure Act had stopped the clock of the old cyclic revolutions of Helpston's agriculture, thus initiating Clare's disorientation, a few low-pitched modern dwellings, and that was all. It was scarcely more impressive in Clare's lifetime. A contemporary clergyman, gazing at it, said that 'its unbroken tracts strained and tortured the sight'. But not the poet's sight, of course. This it nourished and extended with its modest images. He liked to follow the view past the 'lands', which he disliked because of the way they overtaxed the strength of his slight body when he laboured on them, to where the cultivation dropped away into a meeting with heath and fen. From here onwards the alluvial soil swept unbroken to the sea. It was this landscape of the limestone heath, he said, which 'made my being'. And thus it was in this practically featureless country that genius discovered all that it required for its total expression. From it Clare was to suffer a triple expulsion. The first entailed that fracture from his childhood vision of his home scene,

something which we all have to endure. The second was when the fields and roads of Helpston were radically redesigned in 1816, evicting him from all its ancient certainties. The third, and quite the most terrible, was when it was arranged for him to live in the next village, a well meaning interference with an inherited perspective which, in his special case, guaranteed the further journey to Northampton lunatic asylum.

To be a native once meant to be a born thrall. Clare's enthrallment by Helpston presents the indigenous eye at its purest and most naturally disciplined. By his extraordinary ability to see furthest when the view was strictly limited, he was able to develop a range of perception which outstripped the most accomplished and travelled commentary on landscape and nature, of which in the early nineteenth century there was a great deal. He had no choice. He did not pick on Helpston as a subject. There was no other place. As a boy, like most children, he had once set out from his village to find 'the world's end', and got lost.

so I eagerly wanderd on & rambled along the furze the whole day till I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers and birds seemd to forget me and I imagind they were the inhabitants of new countrys the very sun seemd to be a new one and shining on a different quarter of the sky (*By Himself*, pp. 40-1)

is how he described this adventure in his autobiography. And twice more in this book, when he was aged fifteen and when he was aged twenty, he tells of a kind of geographical giddiness, such as that which one has when being spun round blindfold in some game, when he had to leave the balanced centre of his native village to look for work in nearby market towns, and his sense of psychic displacement went far beyond that which could have been brought on by the strain of interviews and so forth. Here is Clare again, as the universe itself careens out of control because he is unable to use his village reference points.

I started for Wisbeach with a timid sort of pleasure and when I got to Glinton turnpike I turnd back to look on the old church as if I was going in to another country Wisbeach was a foreign land to me for I had never been above 8 miles from home in my life and I coud not fancy england much larger then the part I knew ... I became so ignorant in this far land that I coud not tell which quarter the wind blew from and I even was foolish enough to think the suns course was alterd and that it rose in the west and set in the east I often puzzld at it to set my self right...

(*By Himself*, pp. 69-70, 76)

'I became so ignorant in this far land...', 'to set my self right'—these are the telling words. Beyond his own parish boundary Clare felt that he was ignorant. He felt his intelligence desert him and that another man's scene—even another man's sun—could not be

understood. When the success of his two collections of published poems brought him into contact with literary London, an event for which many a provincial writer prayed in the hope that their work would provide the exit visa from the limitations which had inspired it, Clare reacted very wisely indeed. 'It seems', says John Barrell in his excellent study, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare*, 'that the more the poet began to understand about literary London, the more tenacious became his desire to write exclusively about Helpston.' London's literary landscapes knew no bounds at all. They swept back in immense, formal vistas carrying the educated eye to valleys in Thessaly and to Roman farms. Knowing that he could never be entirely free at home and accepting an element of imprisonment as the major condition for his being a poet, Clare chose the local view. I believe that, whether with a feeling of relief or despair—or both—the majority of what are called regional poets and novelists come to a similar decision. Their feeling for nature and the landscape of man deepens when it remains hedged about by familiar considerations. Paradoxically, they discover that it is not by straying far from the headlands that they are able to transport their readers into the farthest realms of the imagination and its truths, but by staying put. I find that I have two states of local landscape consciousness. The first I would call instinctive and unlettered, a mindfulness of my own territory which has been artlessly and sensuously imbibed. On top of this I have a country which I have deduced or discovered from scientific, sociological, aesthetic and religious forays into its depths. Of course, like the rest of us, I want to have my cake and eat it too. I do not want the first knowledge, wherein lies all the heart and magic, to give way entirely to the second knowledge, wherein lie all the facts. It is the usual dilemma of intuition versus tuition and how to reconcile the one with the other without patronising either. Because my boyhood East Anglia was by far the major source of all the references which have directed me as a writer, I find myself constantly hankering after primordial statements which still float around in my memory, and which seem to say something more relevant about my own geography than anything my trained intelligence can tell me, yet which tantalisingly avoids definition. All the same, I must say something about the fields and streams and skies the cottages, gothic churches, lanes and woods of Suffolk as I first recognised them. This could have been the time when I knew the river but did not know its name. Certainly it is a verifiable fact that much which can be seen now could be seen then—when I was ten or twelve. Or two or three. When does one begin to look? Or does landscape enter the bloodstream with the milk?

'Local'—a limited region, says the dictionary. And 'location', the marking out or surveying of a tract of land. Also a position in space. So, early on, we begin to take stock of our limited regions, marking them out, and with never a suspicion that they at this period could be marking us out. I took stock of flowers first, then paths and then architecture. I do not know that I ever at this time took stock of weather or of inhabitants. The latter were thin

then, pared down to the high cheek-bone by the long agricultural depression and with skins polished by the winds. But however great the omissions, I saw enough to lay in a lasting stock of feeling and emotion, for as Lord Holland said, 'There is not a living creature ... but hath the sense of feeling, although it hath none else.' We, of course, are taking feeling beyond such an elementary sensation and into human sensibility. It is this proto-sensibility created by the impact of nature on our earliest awareness that intrigues us later on. We know that climates create cultures and cultures create types, but an individual voice within us says that there is more to it than this, conceit notwithstanding.

'Those scenes made me a painter', wrote John Constable, acknowledging the river valley in which I now live and just above which I was born. It has been said that from these scenes he fashioned the best-loved landscapes of every English mind. Thomas Gainsborough too, another local boy pushed into art by scenery, was born in this valley and was sketching along the same footpaths in the eighteenth century as I, when a child, was wandering in the twentieth. Indeed, my old farmhouse is roughly perched at the frontier of these two artists' territorial river inspirations. Gainsborough's landscape was upstream and flowing back in golden-brown vistas to the Dutch masters; Constable's was down stream and flowing forward to the French Impressionists. When I was an adolescent, these two local painters dominated my equally native landscape to an alarming extent, often making it impossible to see a field for myself. And I was further alarmed when I heard that Sickert had called the entire district a sucked orange. Would there be anything left for a writer to feed on, or would I be like someone attempting to take an original view of Haworth or Egdon Heath? Ancestry decided it. Not that I knew much about the centuries of farming fathers stretching away from me, perhaps into Saxon days, but the realisation that our eyes had repeatedly seen the same sights began to promote a way of looking at life which was vigorous and questioning, and which did not depend on past conclusions.

And so what was my inherited perspective? What, particularly, was I recognising before I was educated in history and ecology and, most potently, in literature? Or even in local loyalty, for in all the provinces, in every hamlet, one might say, there is this beaming self-congratulation of those who have been born there and who indicate that it would be superfluous to ask more of life. Although not quite as restricted as Clare in mileage terms, as a boy in those immediate pre-World War Two days from a rural family apparently existing on air, I saw a very little world indeed. Until I was twelve or so, East Anglia was for me no more than a small circle of villages round a small town, plus an annually visited beach, or rather a slipping, clinking wall of cold shingle, monotonously piled up and pulled down by the North Sea. The landscape of Crabbe, in fact, who had made the definitive statement about it. Benjamin Britten was able to say something else about it in another medium. I saw this beach as the edge to my interior landscape, disregarding the distance in between. From the beginning I was laying claim to a broader scenic inheritance than some writers. The

Cumbrian poet Norman Nicholson has not only restricted himself to Millom, his home town, but finds himself far from cramped, creatively speaking, in the modest house where he was born and where his grandparents' wallpapers lie beneath his own interior decoration like a palimpsest of their domesticity. Nicholson warns us, particularly writers, of how we tend to overload infant experience with intelligence of a later date. At the beginning of his autobiography he gives a remarkably convincing apology for the merest squint of landscape being adequate for a child's imaginative growth. In comparison with his first contemplation of nature, mine was on the scale of the Grand Canyon. His confession is all the more interesting because just a mile or two away from where he was making do with a creeper on a brick wall rolled landscape with a capital L, Wordsworth's landscape of the Lakes! During his early years this great scene had been bricked out without cost. It was the bricked-in prospect which became so perversely satisfying and which made his blood thunderous with imagination. Nicholson wrote of this backyard behind his father's tailor's shop as a little Eden, a Garden Enclosed.

Even today I survey it with a complacency equal to that of any Duke of Devonshire looking out from Chatsworth ... seen from the yard, there was only the sky, broken by two telephone poles and a pulley for a washing-line. And when you looked out of the window of the little back bedroom, you could see the explanation of this emptiness, for the whole length of the other side of the street was taken up by the wall of the old Millom Secondary School, almost every corner of which could be kept under watch from our house ... But if I climb up to our second storey and push my head out of the fanlight in the back attic, I can look ... and see what I used to see, the St George's Hall, the scraggy, slag-clogged fields, the old mines at Hodbarrow, the hills of Low Furness across the estuary [though] the view and even the school playground were all too far away to mean much to me at that age. I rarely ventured out into the street ... I stayed behind the back door, teasing the dog, trotting up and down the slate slabs that paved the yard or dibbling a fork into the few clods of soil we called our garden. For when my father first came to The Terrace, he had up-ended a row of black tiles, cemented them to the slate paving about a foot away from the wall, and filled in the space between tiles and wall with soil dug up with a pen-knife on his walk round the fields and carried home carefully in brown paper bags. In this he had planted a few cuttings of Virginia Creeper [which] has routed its black arteries all over the walls, giving them the withered, sinewy look of an old coal miner's arms ...

Lying unclaimed and ignored, and within walking distance of this artfully skimmed outlook, was the view proper, the massive outcrops of the Lake District rock and the broad Irish Sea.

Nicholson waited until he was grown-up before entering into this inheritance, and later he has half-mockingly rejoiced in being fashioned by a minimal view in one of the world's maximum areas of the literary imagination, and to have succeeded in getting himself awakened by it without having any idea that Wordsworth and Coleridge were crying 'Awake!' so profoundly a mile or two away. My own powerful landscape inheritance was not walled off from me until I grew up. There was no pittance to start with in the shape of an elementary soil brought home in paper-bags, no rationing of the sky, no ignoring of the native scene's prophets, one of whom was no less than the foremost artist of the English romantic movement, John Constable. And yet, like all children, how little of it I comprehended as a boy! Looking back, I am as much intrigued by my blindness to the obvious, as by the way I sometimes instantly grasped some central truth. There seems to be a considerable osmotic action in landscape, particularly one's native landscape, which causes it to be breathed in as it thrusts against our earliest senses. Being there, right under our noses, we inhale it as well as comprehending it with our intellects. For some it is a fatal air, for others a kind of inescapable nourishment which expands the soul. Quite where the emotional—I will not say mindless—absorption and the instructed viewpoint began to fuse in myself, I find it impossible to say. Nor can I tell if I have continued all these years, living as I have among the first earthly patterns and colours I ever saw, to absorb them instinctively as well as intellectually. But I do recall some of those instances in which the obvious says nothing to the child. For example, I climbed a road called Gallows Hill every day and never once did it say something agonising, macabre and morbid to me. What it said was freedom, running loose. Gallows Hill was the path to the white violet and cowslip sites—for plants remained undisturbed in their locations for generations then, and village people of all ages saw them as a form of permanent geography by which the distance of Sunday walks could be measured, or where tea or love could be made, or, in my case, where books could be read. These special flowers in their hereditary places were solidly picked, I might add, but there were always just as many next year. Had the victims of Gallows Hill picked them in the years before they picked pockets? I expect so.

Gallows Hill also led to Froissart and Malory for me, for just above stood a little moated manor with a castellated tower and swans on the dark water, and even now I see this as an annexed scene, as a house which does not belong to its residents, but to my most personal countryside. So do the aged village relations who sat four-square in their lush gardens like monuments, as if growing out of the Suffolk clay itself, their bodies wooden and still, their eyes glittering and endlessly scanning leaves and birds and crops, their work done and their end near. I remember very distinctly how these old country people were not so much figures in a landscape, as local men and women who, in their senescence, were browning and hardening back into its simple basic elements.

As a rule, children draw back from the illimitable, except when they catch such suggestions of it in the experience of running down grassy slopes with open arms on a windy day, and prefer the secret, the clandestine and the enclosed. I had to grow up to see that East Anglia was not a snug den but a candid plain, an exposed and exposing place. Once it was all manageable privacies and concealments, each memorably furnished with its particular stones, flora, water and smells. In this secret range I included the North Sea, for although it was all of thirty miles off and seen so rarely, perhaps only once a year, I felt the same parochial tenderness about it as I did about the meadows—fields, really, gone to weed due to the agricultural depression—which led to my grandmother’s house. As I sighted this quite unimaginably immense liquid wall at the end of the coast road, with the Rotterdam shipping riding its horizon, I can remember how it revoked all the feelings I had for the interior. The sea makes us treacherous; it captures our senses and makes us faithless to the land. I found myself in a different state by the sea; not freed, but in another kind of captivity. I lived by it briefly when I first became a writer and felt myself both in my own deeply rooted country and on the edge of things. The entire ecology changes long before one even suspects the presence of the Suffolk sea. A twelve-mile belt of light soil, which we call the sandlings, produces heath and coniferous forests, and pale airy villages, dyked meadows and vast stretching skies, and by the time one has reached the rattling beach, still guarded by forts built to repel Bonaparte and Hitler, the interior seems remote. This is the land of our seventh-century Swedish kings who lie buried in their great ships at Sutton Hoo and whose palace is under a Nato bomber base. Screaming sea-birds and screaming planes on practice runs, and often profound silences, this is the indigenous periphery. Also a cutting wind and an intriguing marine flora which between them force the gaze to the ground. This is Benjamin Britten’s rim of country. When, at the end of his life, he worked for a brief spell in a cottage sunk in the cornlands of Suffolk, he told me how utterly different the imaginative stimulus was, and I realised that we had shared similar experiences of territorial disorientation within the home area, but from opposite directions.

What half-entranced, half-shocked me about the coast was its prodigious wastefulness. Here nature was humanly unmanageable, and I was not deceived by breakwater and drain or the sly peace of the marshes. There was another kind of wastefulness in the central clay country which, to my child’s eye, was transmuted into a private harvest of benefits. Every hollow held water, and in the ancient horse-ponds and moats, under coverlets of viridescent slime starred with water ranunculus, lay the wicked pike, fish of legendary size, cunning and appetite which we believed were a century old, and which grew fat on suicides. The small heavy land fields had not then been opened up to suit modern machinery, and most of them possessed what the farmers called ‘muddles’, or uncultivated scraps which were crammed with birds, insects, flowers, shrubs, grasses and animals. Towering quickset hedges from enclosure days survived as well as mixed shrub

hedges from Saxon, Norman and Tudor times, all still containing the oak trees which Shakespearean ploughmen must have used to set their first furrow. The surface of the land was littered with flint, and no matter however much was picked up for making churches and roads, no field was ever cleared, even when it had been hand-quarried for a millennium. It was a kind of catch-crop which worked itself up to the surface from its silican depths to provide assured hard labour for each succeeding generation of country people. Its permanency was like that of the mountains to field-workers in the north. 'So light a foot will ne'er wear out the everlasting flint,' says the priest as Juliet approaches to marry Romeo. We expended a massive amount of energy splitting these weighty stones to find the toad which was said to live inside them. We also spent hours in vast old gravel-pits searching for 'dawn stones' (eoliths, as I was to learn in my gradual enlightenment), but which then I was convinced meant the first stones warmed by the sun in the first chapter of Genesis. We would spend whole days in these workings, many feet below the peripheral corn, scraping away at the partly-known and the unrealised, but really at our ultimate ancestry, the Scandinavian Maglemose forest folk who, ten thousand years ago, before the sea washed us away from the continental mainland to which we were tenuously attached by salty lagoons, walked to Suffolk and began agricultural pattern-making on its fertile clays. We learned that they were followed by the Windmill Hill folk and the Beaker people, and these homely appellations would cut through time as the blade cut through June grass, making hay of its density. Distant past has moments of tangibility to a native, particularly to one who has not yet encountered the written history of his area. I can remember the need or compulsion I had to touch stones. I suppose I felt them for their eloquence and because an adjacent artifact told me that a Windmill boy might have done the same. Later, I came to love the stoniness of the symbolism in the poetry of Sidney Keyes, one of the best poets of the last war, who died in African sand, aged twenty-one.

It must be added that, seascape or richly dilapidated clayscape, the natural history of my childhood was marvellously impacted with mystery. There were swaying rookeries and barns like dust-choked temples almost within the precincts of our market town, behind the main streets of which ran a maze of courts and yards fidgety with sullen life. Naphtha flares blazed over the banana stalls and cheapjacks in the square, whilst mediaeval bells burred their sound for miles along the river valley when the wind was right. Having the wind right for this or that was something one heard a lot about. It was the bitter wind of a dry country and you had to stand up to it, they said. Vagrants and itinerants brewing up in the shelter of marl-pits fought a losing battle against it, and the silk factory operatives, sweeping in and out of their villages on bicycles, were swept along by it like pedalling birds. The scene was one of stagnant animation. One would catch the eye of a solitary worker among the sugar-beet, and it would be strangely hard and transparent, like glass. Extremes were normal. I once saw twenty men joyfully and silently clubbing scores of rats to death in a

stackyard. No words, only rat-screams. Only a few yards from this spot Gainsborough had posed Mr and Mrs Robert Andrews against a spectacle made up of trees and towers and bending stream, and painted what Sir Sacheverell Sitwell has called the finest English domestic portrait. The young husband is seated between his gun and his wife. And once on this hill I heard the rarest, most exquisite aeolian music when the wind was right. It was a sound that made one weightless and emancipated, and I had that momentary sensation of being nature—nothing less or else.

Richard Jefferies used a nineteenth-century language to describe this transition of man into landscape and landscape into man in *The Story of My Heart*. We may have a later language or no language at all to put this feeling into words, but we have shared the experience. This is his way of putting it:

Moving up the sweet short turf, at every step my heart seemed to obtain a wider horizon of feeling; with every inhalation of rich pure air, a deeper desire. The very light of the sun was whiter and more brilliant here. By the time I had reached the summit I had entirely forgotten the petty circumstances and the annoyances of existence. I felt myself, myself. There was an intrenchment on the summit, and going down into the fosse I walked round it slowly to recover breath ... There the view was over a broad plain, beautiful with wheat, and inclosed by a perfect amphitheatre of green hills. Through these hills there was one narrow groove, or pass, southwards, where the white clouds seemed to close in the horizon. Woods hid the scattered hamlets and farmhouses, so that I was quite alone. I was utterly alone with the sun and the earth. Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth's firmness—I felt it bear me up ...

Recognisable in this post-Darwinian, pre-Freudian landscape confession is that confusion of the newly articulate response and incommunicable sensation which all of us have known. Jefferies was often exasperated by not being able to find a natural way to talk about nature. He saw that men operated on the assumption that nature was something which surrounded them but which did not enter them. That, glorious though it was, and inspiring, they were outside its jurisdiction. When they spoke of the influence of environment on a person, they meant some aspect of men's social environment, not climate and scenery. The man who, for some reason or other, remains on his home ground, becomes more controlled by the controlling forces of all that he sees around him than he could wish or realise. Jefferies sought such a control in a quasi-religious and poetic pilgrimage to the grassy heights above his Wiltshire farm, and Thomas Hardy and Emily Brontë created immense dramas by allowing their characters to be activated as much by weather and place as by society. These,

and many other writers and artists, shock us by showing us the malignancy of the native scene, how it imprisons us as well as releases us. Jefferies and Hardy, of course, were cynically amused that we should imagine it would be interested in doing either.

However, because we have had such a considerable hand in the actual arrangement of the local view, we must be allowed some subjectivity. Over the centuries we introduced the non-indigenous trees and flowers and crops, we made the roads, fields and buildings, and we filled in the heath with forests and levelled the woods for corn. What we see is not what nature, left to its own devices, would let us see. To be born and to die in an untouchable scene, in the wild mountains, for example, is quite a different matter. Comparatively few people do this. And so what the majority of us celebrate as natives is native improvements. The shapes, colours and scents have an ancestral significance, and what moves us is that the vista does not radiate from some proto-creation like a dawn stone but that it is a series of constructions made by our labouring fathers. Within these, the normal partisan provincial will insist, must lie all that the inner and outward life requires.

Landscape and human sensibility can come to shallow terms in villages, which are notorious for the resentment they display when some indigenous guide, poet or painter, presents them with the wider view. The field workers who saw Cézanne and Van Gogh painting, and John Clare writing, believed that they were in the company of blasphemers. In a letter to his publishers Clare complains how isolating it is to be in possession of a literate landscape.

I wish I livd nearer you at least I wish London w[oud] creep within 20 miles of helpstone [] I don't wish helpstone to shift its station I live here among the ignorant like a lost man in fact like one whom the rest seem careless of having anything to do with—they hardly dare talk in my company for fear I should mention them in my writings & I find more pleasure in wandering the fields than in musing among my silent neighbours who are insensible of every thing but toiling & talking of it & that to no purpose (*Letters*, p. 230)

And yet, ironically, it was only by keeping their faces to the earth could these neighbours and their forebears carve out the sites where the poet's intelligence could dwell. The average home landscape entailed more looking down than looking around. As for the agreeability of a used countryside, as the poet and critic Geoffrey Grigson said, 'When I see men, and women, bent over the crops, I realise it isn't so agreeable for them. "*C'est dur l'agriculture*" (read Zola in *La Terre*). I like seeing machines which keep the human back from bending, as in the last five thousand years.'

When I was writing *Akenfield*, and thinking of the old and new farming generations, it struck me that I was seeing the last of those who made landscapes with their faces

hanging down, like those of beasts, over the soil. Grigson also notes how artists and poets push landscape forward, thrust it into view and make contact with it unavoidable. In the past the figures which inhabited it were both gods and mortals, Venus and the village girl, Apollo and the shepherd. The scene was both natural and supernatural. And the indigenous man will occasionally look up from his disturbance of the surface of his territory as he earns his living, to draw into himself all that lies around him in a subconscious search for transcendence. From childhood on, what he sees, he is. Flesh becomes place. Although it was said of my East Anglian countryman, George Borrow, that he could look at nature without looking at himself. What an achievement!

CHAPTER II

'Solvitur ambulando': Clare and Footpath Walking

None of us now realise what walking was like to the people who lived in villages like Helpston, all over Britain, for centuries. In her interesting study *The English Path* (1979) Kim Taplin wonders why this, one of the main routes to our literature, particularly our poetry, has received so little social investigation. There are plenty of books on roads, but few explanations of paths. We do of course have a whole library on roads, rambling, and walking these days. But the study of paths themselves is as fugitive as these tracks, which have to be traced through our own rural world and rural writers alike, for us to have any real knowledge of them. One of Kim Taplin's chapters is called *Solvitur Ambulando*. She describes this as an 'old Latin tag [which] means something like "you can sort it out by walking"'. She continues:

Working out, finding out, unknotting and freeing are all possible connotations of the word *solvitur*, and in this chapter I want to look at the claims of certain writers for the benefits of footpath walking to the spirit. Andrew Young used the words in his poem *A Traveller in Time*:

Where was I? What was I about to see?

Solvitur ambulando.

A path offered its company

A companionable path was more apt for a curative release than a road, since solitude, peace, and close contact with nature, as well as the action of walking, are all important ingredients. Problems unravel as the feet cover the miles, but through the body's surroundings, as well as the body's action. (p. 103)

My own existence is as controlled by footpaths as those of my farming ancestors in Suffolk. Friends have often told me that my life would be transformed if I drove a car, forgetting how transformed it has been because I don't. And so I walk a mile of flinty track to fetch the milk, and two miles to the village post office, church or pub, and more miles too when I get stuck with my writing, and wander off to the river path for a little *solvitur ambulando*. So I have done since a boy, in these more or less same scenes. And so of course did most of our forbears, including quite recent ones. And did we but comprehend it, a great amount of our best poetry, novels and essays smell, not of the lamp, but of dust, mud, grit, pollen, and, I expect, sweat. Even the clergy took to the inspiring tramp via something

called a 'sermon walk'. There was one at Little Easton rectory, where I used to stay a long time ago. It was a long lawn between discreet hedges and borders, where the Rector could stroll up and down, spinning thoughts around his text for Sunday.

John Clare is the genius of the footpath. So poignant is his statement on the road that it tends to overlay his many and various statements on the footpaths. That wretched road journey, in July 1841, just after his forty-sixth birthday, when he was alone, weakening and penniless, and when he had to, as he said, 'lay down with my head towards the north to show myself the steering point in the morning', was a walk entirely isolated from every other walk he had, or made, or would ever make. But it is these other walks I would like to dwell upon here.

But first of all I should add that during the nineteenth century—or any century other than our own—to tramp eighty miles along one of Britain's main highways in daily stages was commonplace. Enormous distances were covered by Dorothy and William Wordsworth, and by Coleridge and the Hazlitts—especially Mrs Hazlitt, who was the kind of initial modern woman. She hiked to and fro from Edinburgh to Glasgow during her divorce proceedings, which was a great nuisance to the people carrying them out. Gustav Holst would sometimes walk home to Cheltenham from St. Paul's Girls School, in order to compose. William Langland composed much of *Piers Plowman* whilst on the hoof from Cornhill in London to the Malvern Hills where he was born. Had John Clare been the man he was before disasters of all kinds struck at him, being an inspired walker he would not have been either spiritually daunted or physically wounded by the Great North Road trek: but then he would not have needed to have made it.

His true way, though, was the village footpath. Clare's misfortune was to have some of his favourite paths either ploughed up or straightened out. What we have to appreciate is that part of his personality was as concealment-seeking as the nightingale, as hopefully-hidden as that of certain tucked-away plants on the limestone. The other part was, during his youth at least, like that of any other young man: gregarious, fond of company, of drink and of girls. It was the Clare of the footpaths, and their fugitive destinations, and their hidden bends where he could 'drop down' as he described it to write, to daydream, to have his soul fed by what surrounded him, which produced the poetry. Clare was clearly unaware of how often he mentions footpaths, and his essentially secret wanderings, often just within a stone's throw of the little toiling or playing groups of Helpston itself. Some of his finest footpath writing appears in his essay 'The Woodman, or the Beauties of a Winter Forest'. Here Clare reveals his closest observation, not of birds, but of his footpath-walking neighbours, who are exposed by winter, when all the growth is stripped. There was no cover in winter in the countryside. So he wrote:

[...]the shepherd cuts his journeys short and now only visits his flock on necessity ... Croodling with his hands in his pockets and his crook under his arm he tramples the frosty plain with dithering haste; glad and eager to return to the warm corner of his cottage fire [...] The milk-boy too in his morning rambles no longer saunters to the pasture as he had used to do in summer (pausing on every pathway flower and swanking idly along. often staring with open mouth thoughtlessly musing on the heavens as if he could wish for something in the passing clouds; leaning his lazy sides 'gainst every stile he come[s] to, and can never get his heavy clouded shoon over the lowest without resting; sighing as he retires with the deepest regret to leave such easy chairs)—But now in hasty clumping tread finding nothing but cold and snow to pause on [...] he wishes for nothing but his journeys end

(*Natural History*, pp. 4-5)

In March that same year, 1825, Clare's footpath presents, where he is concerned, sights more vigorous and fascinating, although he is still not entirely alone. We cannot comprehend—I can just remember it as a child—how peopled the countryside was. I went for a walk not long ago, about six miles, and never met a single person in the fields or gardens, and hardly any cars in the narrow lane. But had I walked in my grandfather's time there would be groups of people—hedging, ditching, doing things, children playing, hundreds of people going for walks, courting couples, etc., because the fields really *were* where everybody met. On 25 March, Clare writes:

I took a walk today to botanize & found that the spring had taken up her dwelling in good earnest she has covered the woods with the white anemonie which the childern call Lady smocks & the hare bells are just venturing to unfold their blue drooping bells the green is covered with daisies & the little Celandine the hedge bottoms are crowded with the green leaves of the arum w[h]ere the boy is peeping for pootys with eager anticipations & delight (*Natural History*, p. 59).

Well, *our* footpaths are either deserted, or protected, or threatened, or deliberately walked on by self-conscious rambles and others, and many still exist for their original purpose, which was to make bee-lines across the farmland to moors, or along coasts, or to work. And vast numbers exist on local maps, but not in real local knowledge. Many have grown into lanes, and the lanes themselves have grown into roads. A lane is defined as a narrow way between hedges and banks. A footpath is the narrowest way, trodden between crops or wild plants. John Clare mourned the loss of many of them after Helpston was enclosed. Indeed he raged and ranted about it; justly, at what for him was the sacrilege of destroying one of the holiest places in any village: that way along which his people had

walked for centuries, a sanctified route to work, a sanctified route to love, a sanctified route to companionship, and to things which were infinitely precious to a man, a woman, or a child.

Some years ago I was taken to Bunyan's footpaths by a friend, and I saw that the site of the great writer's family house was just a rough little cot by the side of a rivulet, which had supplied water for the Bunyans for centuries: nothing there except a few tiles amongst the weeds. The total disappearance of his house excepted, Bunyan's home fields at Elstow must be among the least changed surroundings of any major British author. But they still can only be reached by the footpaths which he used, one of which follows the stream from Harroden, and the other of which leads to the centre of his village. And—shades of John Clare—the vicar of a neighbouring parish had written that in Anno 1625 (this is when Bunyan was three years old) 'one Bunyan of Elstow, climbing of rook's nests in the Berry Wood, found three rooks in a nest, all as white as milk, and not a black feather in them'.

Footpaths did not guarantee solitude; we make a mistake sometimes to think that Clare by simply walking away from the middle of his village found solitude. There was always somebody up a tree, or under a bush, or just tiffing about, as they used to say, with a scythe, or hiding away with a sweetheart or a book, or usually just routinely travelling to the workplace. Bunyan was a whitesmith who had to carry a heavy anvil on his back to the houses which needed their pewter mended, and he would sensibly have always chosen the narrow way. But it was not a lonely way.

Footpaths may have had to be used by everybody, but they often could only be walked in single file, and should you meet someone coming from the opposite direction you would step into the undergrowth to let them pass. The constant narrow walking seemed to stimulate the wild flowers which separated just far enough to allow human feet to progress. And similarly there were ground nests perilously close to where one walked. I used to know the writer Adrian Bell, who wrote his trilogy in an old farmhouse, just below mine. During the snowy Christmas of 1928, Adrian Bell noted how, due to the lanes being blocked by drifts, the people were seen plodding straight to their objects across the fields, whether it is to the church spire, snow-encrusted cottages, or the chimneys. 'And who are they?', he asks, 'not travellers from afar, for they would not venture out today at all. No, these are the parish workers, who when times are normal, take serpentine routes by by-roads on bicycles'.

'Take the gentle path', advises George Herbert in his plea, 'Discipline'. Bunyan maintained that a simple way to become a heavenly footman—he means a walker in paradise, not a servant—was to walk the earth. Until recently, few had any alternative. Just before this century, everyone walked. Clare's constant walking in his landscape was the norm; except that sometimes he walked, where his Helpston neighbours were concerned, to what was recognisably work—gardening, ploughing, hedging, erranding; and sometimes to what to them was clearly not work—reading and writing, in dips and hollows—a very

strange thing to do; and sometimes he walked just to look. And so he became what most village people dread being: odd, strange, different. With so many of the hereditary footpaths over-exposed by enclosure, Clare walked on, until he himself was mercifully enclosed by the woods and the wilds, and by the useless waste at Barnack, where the plough could not go in. These remote and, in summertime especially, overgrown footpaths became his dreamlines.

He often writes of dropping down, a kind of birdlike movement, when some thought strikes him, in order to make a note of it. When he was working as a lime-burner, he had to walk between two kilns which were about three miles apart, one at Pickworth and one at Ryhall. At Pickworth, he worked with another man; at Ryhall, by himself, and he wrote:

...I often went there to work by myself w[h]ere I had leisure to study over such things on my journeys of going and returning to and fro; and on these walks morning and night I have dropd down 5 or 6 times, to [write] (*By Himself*, p. 22)

There was no dropping down when he was ploughing, which is a very public thing to do. What came to him in the fields he had to hold tight in his head, after a day's toiling on the farm, until he got to his bedroom, then he would write. In his autobiography, Clare uses the walk metaphor to describe his early sense of being both different and isolated. His mother had talked of his going into service, at which he winced, and had given him a box for his things when he left home. All servants left home with a box. But he filled his box with books, and his first poems, and he wrote:

...I always looked sullen when my mother talkd of Service [...] I now began to value my abilitys as superiour to my companions and exulted over it in secret ... I considerd walking in the track of others ... had as little merit in it as a child walking in leading strings ere it can walk by itself when I happend with them [i.e. his companions] in my sunday Walks I often try'd their taste by pointing out some striking beauty in a wild flower or object in the surrounding s[c]enery to which they woud seldom make an answer, and if they did twas such as 'they coud see nothing worth looking at' ... I often wondered that, while I was peeping about and finding such quantitys of pleasing things to stop and pause over, another shoud pass me as carless as if he was blind I thought somtimes that I surely had a taste peculialy by myself and that nobody else thought or saw things as I did (*By Himself* pp. 16-17)

They didn't, of course—until Clare had turned these observations into poems, and then they did. But 'peeping', 'secret', 'seeing', 'finding': this is the language of the footpath walker. Clare's first poem was called 'The Morning Walk' and it was composed while walking to Glington, two miles. Years later, when he was working on the great book that never was, his

Helpston version of White's *Natural History of Selborne*, he remembered a marvellous sight from a footpath, and wrote:

once when I was young man on staying late at a feast I cross<ed> a meadow about midnight & saw to my supprise quantities of small nimble things emigrating across it a long way from any water I thought at first that they were snakes but I found on a closer observation that ther were young eels making for a large pond called the Islet pool which they journeyd to with as much knowledge as if they were acquainted with the way I thought this a wonderfull discovery (*Natural History*, pp. 69-70)

Clare was more than acquainted with the *way*, that simplest, purest, most eloquent of ways, the footpath. And life only went wrong when he was diverted from it. He knew where he stood. He knew where he should walk. He knew when he should drop down. He knew what no other English writer knew or knows, which is what the English countryman's eyes saw, or sees, in its purity. Clare was hard on the 'clowns', as he called them, but we know that countless people, whilst on the way to work, or at work itself, are unwittingly visionary, and that they do not pass through these scenes on earth without taking them in, and wondering at them sometimes. What they—or few of us do, is to drop down in our tracks to write because the need to write is overwhelming, as it is with writers. There were days when Clare could not follow the footpaths. On Thursday 23 September, 1824 he writes:

A wet day did nothing but nurse my illness Coud not have walkd out had it been fine very disturbd in conscience about the troubles of being forcd to endure life & dye by inches & the anguish of leaving my childern & the dark porch of eternity whence none returns to tell the tale of their reception (*Natural History*, p. 181)

But a few weeks later—what a change!

Sunday 31 Oct 1824

Took a walk got some branches of the spindle tree with its pink colord berys that shine beautifully in the pale sun—found for the first time 'the herb true love' or 'one berry' [*Paris quatrifolia*] in Oxey Wood brought a root home to set in my garden
(*Natural History*, p. 197)

The following Spring, we have endless footpath walks: one at three o'clock in the morning; and one that ended up with the comic scene of Clare barking like a dog to see off a vixen (13 May 1825):

Met with an extraordinary incident to day while Walking in Open wood to hunt a Nightingales nest—I popt unawares on an old Fox & her four young Cubs that were playing about she saw me & instantly approachd towards me growling like an angry dog I had no stick & tryd all I coud to fright her by imitating the bark of a fox hound which only irritated her the more & if I had not retreated a few paces back she woud have seized me when I set up an haloo she started (*Natural History*, p. 239)

He had all the countryman's terror of spooks, of shadows, of following footsteps, of fierce animals:

The boy returning home at night from toil
 Down lane and close oer footbrig gate and style
 Oft trembles into fear and stands to hark
 The waking fox renew his short gruff bark
 While badgers eccho their dread evening shrieks
 And to his thrilling thoughts in terror speaks
 (*Shepherd's Calendar*, 'March', ll. 170-6)

As Margaret Grainger has pointed out, many of John Clare's walks were systematic. He often wandered, but there were times when he walked to plan. She traces three walks: a walk due east from Northborough, to the River Welland and up the west bank to Deeping Gate; a walk from Nine Bridges, Northborough, along the north bank of the North Drain to Lolham Bridges; and a walk between Waldram Hall and Welland Ford (*Natural History*, p. 328). These were systematic walks for work purposes, such as naturalists walk. She also saw signs on some manuscripts which showed that many natural history notes must have been jotted down as he walked, just as he used to do as a young man, when he says 'I usd to drop down behind a hedge bush or dyke and write down my things upon the crown of my hat' (*By Himself*, p. 78).

And this also reminds me of the youthful Thomas Hardy. I had to help edit the new Wessex edition of Hardy in the 1970s, and read a lot about his work methods (writers are always fascinated by other writers' work methods, even down to ink and pens, and where they sat). I went to Bockhampton, the thatched birthplace, near Dorchester, and into the room he shared with his brother. There was a little cupboard where they kept their clothes, and there was the narrow wooden window-seat in a casement, on which Hardy sat to write *Far From the Madding Crowd*. The house had been built by his grandfather, in a woodland—the woodland of *The Woodlanders* in fact—and when Hardy needed to stretch his legs he would dash out of the cottage and go for a walk where the woodlanders were working: with axes, not chainsaws. When you cut a tree down two men axe it in alternative strokes and

white chippings fly out. Thinking of something new to put in *The Woodlanders* Hardy would pick up the chips and write on them, place them in his pockets, take them home and fit them into the chapter. Clare too was doing this kind of thing when he used his hat as a desk. Both writers shared this urgency to put things down.

References to his footpath walks to both of his kinds of work, on the farms and on the page, are myriad in Clare's poetry. In 'Stray Walks' he says:

How pleasant are the fields to roam and think
Whole sabbaths through, unnoticed and alone (*Middle Period*, IV, p. 302)

And there is the ever-sacred walk to Mary Joyce, the walk he took when he could no longer walk alone. One of the horrible ironies of Clare's life was that he, the walker, was incarcerated for so long (it is one thing to walk on footpaths, and quite another to walk in the grounds of an asylum, or even to Northampton Church). The sacred walk to Mary Joyce went on many years after the courtship: it went on at Northborough, at Epping, and at Northampton. He wrote:

I've ran the furlongs to thy door
And thought the way as miles
With doubts that I should see thee not
And scarcely staid for stiles (*Summerfield*, p. 133)

And he wrote:

Past stiles the which a steeple we espy
Peeping stretching in the distant sky
(*'Pleasant Places'*, *Selected Poems and Prose*, p. 160)

(That is *Glington* of course).

I will conclude with that masterpiece of footpath observation, 'The Pewits Nest'. As we read Clare we recognise the poetry of a walking man. It touches us because we are all descended from the walking men, the walking women, the walking children: and not so very long ago either. Sometimes we forget that it wasn't only the poets, and novelists like Hardy, who had these wonderful ideas as they walked. *Solvitur ambulando* was for all of us, because it stimulates (I don't know whether jogging does that: I rather doubt it). Certainly, these long walks to work, these long walks to school, these long walks with a friend, these long walks just to get out of the house, etc., were part of the pattern of the life of people right up until the modern age. And whilst it happened, their minds ticked over in an

extraordinary way. Because men and women haven't all been able to write, or paint, or make music about certain things, it doesn't mean they haven't experienced them—this is a common mistake. When Crabbe was writing his extremely critical descriptions of *The Village* and *The Borough* he always maintained, and made great care, to sort a few individuals from among the sullen inhabitants who, although ordinary fishermen, fieldworkers, and so on, were also ornithologists, collected butterflies, made gardens, knew about marsh flowers and other things. These were the kind of people Clare used to meet. We call them self-educated, but their true education is not something we can comprehend. It was far deeper than the reading of a few books. It was the landscape being articulated in their heads, via their normal work practices. They had to work long hours. They didn't live as long as we live, but they often saw things as much as poets see things. But they didn't write them down. We cannot possibly sum up what happened long ago, we can only accept and know what artists and writers have taught us. The social historian now travels these paths.

Here is a walking poem, called 'The Pewits Nest':

Accross the fallow clods at early morn
 I took a random track, where scant and spare
 The grass and nibbled leaves all closely shorn
 Leaves a burnt flat all bleaching brown and bare
 Where hungry sheep in freedom range forlorn
 And 'neath the leaning willow and odd thorn
 And molehill large that vagrant shade supplies
 They batter round to shun the teasing flies
 Trampling smooth places hard as cottage floors
 Where the time-killing lonely shepherd boys
 Whose summer homes are ever out of doors
 Their chockholes form and chalk their marble ring
 And make their clay taws at the bubbling spring
 And in their rangling sport and gambling joys
 They straine their clocklike shadows—when it cloys
 To guess the hour that slowly runs away
 And shorten sultry turmoil with their play
 Here did I roam while veering overhead
 The pewet whirred in many whewing rings
 And 'chewsit' screamed and clapped her flapping wings.
 To hunt her nest my rambling steps was led
 O'er the broad baulk beset with little hills
 By moles long-formed and pismires tennanted

As likely spots—but still I searched in vain
When all at once the noisy birds were still
And on the lands a furrowed ridge between
Chance found four eggs of dingy dirty green
Deep-blotched with plashy spots of jockolate stain
Their small ends inward turned as ever found
As though some curious hand had laid them round
Yet lying on the ground with nought at all
Of soft grass withered twitch and bleached weed
To keep them from the rain storms' frequent fall
And here she broods on her unsavory bed
When bye and bye with little care and heed
Her young with each a shell upon its head
Run after their wild parents' restless cry
And from their own fears' tiney shadows run
'Neath clods and stones to cringe and snugly lie
Hid from all sight but the all-seeing sun
Till never—ceasing danger seemeth bye

(Middle Poems, III, p. 472)

CHAPTER III

Clare in Hiding

In his poem 'The Botanist's Walk', written at High Beach, Epping, Clare says of the nightingale 'She hides and sings', which I have often thought might well be a description of himself—'He hides and sings'. Clare brought to a fine art the old village practice of vanishing in the local landscape. A village was, still is in some ways, the least private place on earth. A native village left one exposed and naked. To have kept an important side of oneself from the eyes and ears of the neighbours would have amounted to genius. To be 'different' as Clare was different was disastrous. In Suffolk we called it 'sticking out'. As we know, John Clare stuck out a mile, sometimes miserably, often not caring. Both tough and sensitive, both profoundly native and yet not belonging, he would occasionally rail about the locals, with their ceaseless gossip and prying, though never with surprise. They were the price he paid for living in paradise. He would play down the latter when away from Helpston and apologise for coming from such a dull place, and every now and then, when at home, he would lash out in ferocious criticism of its meanness, cruelty, injustice and grimness, such criticism being the anger he felt towards those who defiled their own nest, so to speak. From boyhood on Clare led a double life at Helpston, a now you see me, now you don't existence. During the course of giving a lecture on Francis Kilvert at Hereford, and mentioning Clare, someone spoke of the poet's east midlands, seen from the train, as being 'a featureless plain for miles and miles'. But then his country was Kilvert country, the Wye Valley, the distant Black Mountains, a delectable border land, although as we know from Kilvert's Diary, a region with its own enchanting, and sometimes terrible, hideaways. A few weeks before this Alan Cudmore and myself had stopped for a picnic by the side of a lane just a couple of miles from Helpston, by chance at a spot which neither of us had noticed before, to find ourselves all at once in a situation of classic John Clare secrecy. There was a group of oaks which would have been full grown in his day, a rutted grassy waste, an empty green lane—and a nightingale in full song. One could have watched the bird or read a book or written verses for hours on end without being seen by a soul. There are villages all over eastern England, like Helpston, which although seemingly laid out on a level which denies shelter or hiding place to those who needed to escape from the community, are full of spots where one can totally disappear.

There is a theme, an obsession, a burning necessity, which runs throughout Clare's poetry and prose, that of going into hiding. Not that he was alone in doing this. Such a disappearance trick was one of the great arts of the noisy, nosy, inquisitive old countryside. William Hazlitt, of whom Clare wrote a sharply observed profile, had practised such hiding away since he was a boy at Wem, when he would read all day long in the long grass, shutting

his ears to cries from the manse. Not long ago I passed my neighbour idling at the far edge of his field and told him, 'Your wife is calling you.' 'I know she is,' he replied. John Clare had to get out of earshot and out of view in order to see and hear. At Dr Allen's no doubt rackety asylum with its inmates, attendants and servants, he wrote:

O take me from the busy crowd,
 I cannot bear the noise;
 For Nature's voice is never loud;
 I seek for quiet joys. (*Later Poems*, I, p. 19)

It was at High Beach that he wrote a disturbing poem on how a patient from the asylum would affect the world outside.

I went in the fields with the leisure I got
 The stranger might smile but I heeded him not
 The hovel was ready to screen from a shower
 And the book in my pocket was read in an hour

The bird came for shelter but soon flew away
 The horse came to look and seemed happy to stay
 He stood up in quiet and hung down his head
 And seemed to be hearing the poem I read

The ploughman would turn from his plough in the day
 And wonder what being had come in his way
 To lie on a molehill and read the day long
 And laugh out aloud when he finished his song

...Fame bade me go on and I toiled the day long
 Till the fields where he lived should be known in my song
 (*Later Poems*, I, 26)

One day Clare lists his own ecstasies, imaginations and hopes. Here is an inventory of delights—delights which he shared only with some of his fellow Helpstonians but which he believed should be shared by all. Orchis hunting. Gipsies. Old stone pits fringed with ivy. Gathering cowslips for wine. The pleasure of waiting in a spot to hear the song of the nightingale. Waiting for a lover. The successive growth of flowers—he means the discovering of a certain flower, such as the white violet, in the same place year after year. The pleasures

of fair-going in boys. The pleasures of cutting open a new book on a spring morning. The pleasures of lovers walking narrow lanes. House-warming customs. Birds-nest building. Larks. The pleasure of the shepherd making marks to tell by the sun the time of the day. The pleasure of the boy angling over the bridge, and of boys stripping off to jump over a cat gallows. The pleasures of schoolboys climbing the leads of the church to cut their names there. The pleasures of pelting at the weather cock. The pleasure of an old man taking a journey to see his favourite oak gathering into leaf.

Clare's study of natural history began in solitude but it eventually opened out into consultation, the more so when Taylor his publisher suggested that he wrote a 'Selborne' for Helpston. Where the village was concerned, his learned interest in plants and birds made him less strange than his regularly vanishing into the wilds to read and scribble. It had no idea how sacred Helpston itself was to him, and that his vanishings were like the withdrawal from the crowd of a contemplative who needed to feed on silence. Just before the fatal move to Northborough so like was he to his 'successive growth flowers' that he might well have been off to Botany Bay—he wrote defensively 'There are some things that I shall regret leaving, and some journeys that I shall make yearly—to see the flood at Lolham Briggs, to gather primroses in Hilly Wood, and hunt the nightingale's nest in Royce Wood, and to go to see the furze in flower on Emmonsails Heath.'

In lieu of what was soon to befall him at Northborough, we can see in this constant listing of his birthplace's secret glories in what he called his 'solitudes', and the intellectual and sensuous responses which they accorded, his own statement of what he knew he possessed, even in the madhouse, his true identity card. There it was, the interior document which showed half his life in the blessed woods and fields, half his life in hell.

O could I be as I have been
 And ne'er can be no more
 A harmless thing in meadows green
 Or on the wild sea shore

O could I be what once I was
 In heaths and valleys green
 A dweller in the summer grass
 Green fields and places green

A tenant of the happy fields
 By grounds of wheat and beans
 By gipsies camps and milking field
 Where luscious woodbine leans

I wish I was what I have been
 And what I was could be
 As when I roved in shadows green
 And loved my willow tree

To gaze upon the starry sky
 And higher fancies build
 And make in solitary joy
 Loves temple in the field (*Later Poems*, I, 598)

At Helpston Clare sought different solitudes, one for nature study, one for 'escape', one for inspiration, one for reading, one for bliss. The uncultivated region beyond the enclosure, the Hills and Holes at Barnack, the muddles and sunken ponds, all became a set of outdoor rooms where he could safely close the door on noise and intrusion. He is the human nightingale who hides and sings.

While I wander to contrive
 For myself a place as good
 In the middle of a wood
 There aside some mossy bank
 Where the grass in bunches rank
 Lifts its down on spindles high
 Shall be where I choose to lie (*'Noon'*, *Selected Poems and Prose*, p. 5)

But other things belonging to what might have been often intrude into these hides, such as Mary Joyce's voice, whose 'beautiful tone ... made loneliness more than alone'. It was often the fate of the religious who went to hear God in desert silences to hear instead some other, unbearable, voice.

John Clare frequently rationalises his need to hide with that of the wild creatures. 'Nightingales are very jealous of intrusions and their songs are hymns to privacy'. He often sees himself like 'the time-killing shepherd boys whose summer homes are ever out of doors' and he celebrates their workaday (and workanight) freedom in two splendid poems, 'A Sunday with Shepherds and Herdboys' and 'Shepherds Hut'. He likes the idea that 'The pewits are hid from all sight but the allseeing sun' and that the martin cat 'hides in lonely shade / here prints of human foot is scarcely made', that the hedgehog hides beneath the rotting hedge, and that 'each nimbling hare / Sturts quick as fear and seeks its hidden lair'. Though the robin seems to be fond of company and the haunts of men, and makes no secret

of its dwelling. Yet when he writes 'The Robin's Nest' he makes it a poem to solitude. Helpston, clogging away on the land, finds him timewasting and problematical. Often in village terms he is a skiver. Even when sharing its normal toil

I homeward used to hie
 With thoughts of books I often read with stealth
 Beneath the blackthorn clumps at dinner hour
 ('Labours Leisure', *Selected Poetry and Prose*, p. 104)

The village would have understood that other stealth which he wrote about. Until quite recently the woods and meadows were erotic. Noting a daisy in some flattened grass, Clare wrote:

Might well e'en Eve to stoop adown and show
 Her partner Adam in the silky grass
 This little gem that smiled where pleasure was
 ('The Eternity of Nature', *Selected Poetry and Prose*, p. 110)

Arm-in-arm courting along the footpaths and lanes was the public statement of the clandestine lovemaking which took place in the secret tangles and wastes. One day Clare would write, wryly, 'The pleasures of youth are enjoyed in youth only'. Soon he would be obliquely describing himself as 'the man of science', and with some justification. For his publisher James Hessey too was recommending him to read Gilbert White. Not that Hessey ever had any great faith in what Clare might do in this direction, but it was a percipient notion all the same. Yet there were dangers. 'I would have you be careful how name by a prose attempt'. But as Margaret Grainger points out in her *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*, publishers like John Taylor and James Hessey could have had little or no comprehension of the intellectual field into which Clare had been taken by Edmund Artis and Joseph Henderson. All three of them had become indeed 'men of science'. Helpston itself positively welcomed the news that Clare was collecting information on birds and beasts and flowers, and was eager to contribute. 'The winter before last one of Phillips draymen of the common brewhouse Stamford, when coming to Helpston, saw a strange bird in Pilsgate meadow ... a schoolmaster was at a public house and tho he had Pennants History he declared that he was unable to call it by its name.' It could have been a young heron or a gannet. As for Clare's prose, it is frequently electric. He is the master of the startled moment, of the confrontation between himself and the surprised creature which he is stalking. He is not at all like Gilbert White. Although he now is 'the man of science' he remains the birdsnesting boy and the bird-like hiding poet. It often embarrassed him to be

caught-out doing youthful things when he was a grown-up. 'I feel almost ashamed of my childish propensities and cannot help blushing if I am observed by a passing neighbour'.

With a possible John Clare's *Natural History of Helpstone* on the stocks, and with the locals finding it an acceptable task, his excursions need no longer be fugitive. When the village saw him, day after day, and even late at night, making for his hides, it made sense to them. They chose to forget that their man of science had previously been notorious for loving 'each desolate neglected spot / That seems in labours left forgot', and had sought relief in finding places which neither plough nor woodman, railway navvy nor roadmaker had violated. It thrilled him to the heart to discover some unreclaimed spot. He moved stealthily among these wastes which had become nature's own enclosures in acts of consecration 'The sacredness of mind in such deep solitudes we seek—and find'. He joins what he calls their 'heirs and tenants'. He wrote,

I felt it happiness to be
Unknown, obscure and like a tree
In woodland peace and privacy
(*'The Progress of Ryhme'*, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, p. 124)

And he is intrigued by seeing the behaviour of someone, such as the cow boy, who gives vent to his feelings when he thinks himself unobserved.

Absorbed as in some vagrant summer dream
And now in gestures wild
Starts dancing to his shadow on the wall
Feeling self-gratified
Nor fearing human thrall
(*'Summer Images'*, *Selected Poetry and Prose*, p. 148)

It was of course this habit of lying low from childhood which made John Clare a naturalist. He was from the very beginning on the level of 'different insects passing and repassing as if going to market or fair, some climbing up bents and rushes like so many church steeples, and others getting out of the sun and into the bosom of a flower'.

Soon he would be hidden away until the end of his life, though not in solitude. That must have been the worst horror of it. He wrote himself out of this worst of all isolation, and incessantly, to bring back the old hiding places, a girl's voice and the wild birds' songs, and an uncontaminated air. He had always loved the Book of Job and now he tasted its despair. In 'The Nightingale's Nest', among his finest achievements, he says;

—How subtle is the bird she started out
And raised a plaintive note of danger nigh
Ere we were past the bramble? and now near
Her nest she sudden stops—as choaking fear
That might betray her home so even now
We'll leave it as we found it—safetys guard
Of pathless solitude shall keep it still
See there shes sitting on an old oak bough
Mute in her fears our presence doth retard
Her Joys and doubts turns all her rapture chill
Sing on sweet bird may no worse hap befall
Thy visions than the fear that now decieves

CHAPTER IV

Clare in Poet's Corner, Westminster Abbey

An address given in Westminster Abbey on Tuesday 13 June 1989 when the Poet Laureate, Ted Hughes, unveiled a memorial to John Clare in Poets' Corner.

In the spring of 1820 John Clare stood on this spot, reading the inscriptions. It was his first visit to London. He was twenty-six, and suddenly famous. *His Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* was a bestseller. His publisher had a list which included Keats, Hazlitt, Lamb and de Quincey, and he had seen posters announcing that the celebrated Madame Vestris would be singing Corri's setting of his poem 'The Meeting' at Drury Lane. He returned home to marry Martha Turner, the girl he had met whilst working as a lime-burner, and to great local fame. He was, he said, 'wearing into the sunshine'. Only four years later he was leaden with anxiety and thinking of death. Instructions for his tomb appear in his Journal.

I wish to lye on the North side of the Church yard just about the middle of the ground w[h]ere the Morning and Evening Sun can linger the longest on my Grave I wish to have a rough unhewn stone something in the form of a mile Stone so that the playing boys may not break it in their heedless pastimes with nothing more on it then this Inscription

HERE Rest the HOPES and Ashes of JOHN CLARE

I desire that no date be inserted there on as I wish to live or dye with my poems and other writings (*By Himself*, p. 246)

What had happened? Ostensibly, the deaths of friends, including that of the friend who had stood by his side here in Westminster Abbey, the kind Octavius Gilchrist from Stamford, but also one of the first of those great despairings which would eventually carry him far from his village Eden and into captivity. John Clare, England's eloquent and most exact indigenous voice, suffered a three-fold expulsion from the scene which was essential to him as a poet, the first when Helpston was radically altered under an Enclosure Act, the second when he was forced to live—in a far better house—three miles away, and the third when he was torn from it by madness.

To be a native once meant to be a born thrall. Yet Clare's enthrallment by Helpston presents the indigenous eye at its purest. By his thrilling ability to see furthest when the view is parochial he was able to produce a range of perceptions which outstripped in their accuracy and authority all the literary attitudes to the countryside current in his day. His

birthplace supplied his axis, and he recognised early on that it was his only safe abiding place. Once, as a child, he set out from Helpston to find ‘the world’s end’, only to discover his entire universe lurch and tilt:

so I eagerly wanderd on & rambled along the furze the whole day till I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers and birds seemd to forget me and I imagind they were the inhabitants of new countrys the very sun seemd to be a new one and shining on a different quarter of the sky (*By Himself*, pp. 40-1)

This is not the only time when he would confess to a kind of geographical giddiness, such as one has when being spun round blindfold in a game. Whenever work or visits to friends took him out of Helpston, he would turn in the road to look back on what was receding, and his intelligence with it. Most writers begin with the strong and complex images of an inherited landscape, whether it is urban or rural. For all great provincial writers such images are both an inspiration—and a burden. Clare’s life in Helpston could never have been enviable yet, as he said, for him there was nowhere else. Flat and workaday as it was, it provided the visionary heights. He liked to stare past the ‘lands’, and their incessant labour, to where the cultivated fields dropped away into woods, heaths and fens, and to where the alluvial soil swept unbroken to the sea. It was this surrounding limestone wildness, still Helpston in his eyes, which, he said, ‘Made my being’.

It also made him, as we now recognise, the botanist’s poet, the ornithologist’s poet and—with a relevance which is startling when seen in connection to today’s debate—a Green poet without peer. He worked on the land, and as a poet, during one of those periods when the countryside was being violated by the usual legalised ruthlessness. The age-old peasant economy was being turned upside-down. Great numbers of villagers were being pauperised by thousands of enclosure acts. One day Clare saw ‘three fellows at the end of Royce wood who I found were laying out the plan for an “Iron rail way”...I little thought that fresh intrusions would interrupt and spoil my solitudes after the Inclosure. They will despoil a boggy place that is famous for Orchises’. The poet has too often been regarded as an ultra-sensitive spirit whose reason was shaken by insensitive publishers and domestic troubles alone, but a major source of Clare’s illness was the violation of his territory—his temple. The making unrecognisable of what had been most familiar. The destruction of natural inheritance and the being pushed around.

Most of us know about his conversion to poetry. It is a famous tale. It’s also a very unusual one, for few writers have been able to recall such a moment. When Clare was thirteen a young friend lent him a battered copy of James Thomson’s *The Seasons*, so battered in fact that most of ‘Winter’ was missing. The friend had become a Methodist and now, he told Clare, he preferred Wesley’s hymns. All the same the book was such a precious

possession he did not *give* it to Clare. So having persuaded his father to let him have one-and-sixpence Clare walked to Stamford to buy a copy, only to find the shop shut because it was Sunday. So he walked all the way there again early the next morning, purchased it, couldn't bear to wait until he got home to read it, so he climbed over Burghley Park wall and there began with 'Spring'. And these are the lines which transformed his existence:

Come, gentle Spring, ethereal mildness come
And from the bosom from yon dropping cloud,
While music wakes around, veil'd in a shower
Of shadowing roses on our plains descend.

The Seasons, with its lulling imprecisions, was nearly eighty years old and the most famous of all the rhymed commentaries on the rural year which over three generations had established a view of the countryside which cushioned its realities. After the triumph of his first collection, and after a less successful second publication entitled *The Village Minstrel*, it was suggested to Clare that he should put his hand to this well-worn format of a country calendar. The reading public knew where it was with such rustic musings. The result was *The Shepherd's Calendar*, his masterpiece. There was no repudiation of Thomson or any of the many other writers who had ground their way through sowings and harvests—only a language which seemed to come from the very earth itself, and which had immemorially belonged to the centuries of men and women who had cultivated it. 'The truest poem of English country life', it has rightly been called. Fed-up with being continually asked how such a person as he could write such poetry, Clare once retorted, 'I kicked it out of the clods'. We know that the fields sang to him, and that he reported the song, and with never a false note. The integration in *The Shepherd's Calendar*, and in Clare's work generally, of all the sounds and sights of a farming community, its ever changing climate and its skills and emotions, is a feat like none other in our literature. Had John Clare not articulated his Helpston, and so completely, we would find it harder to say who *we* are, for most of us descend from such a society. He takes us to the heart of it and is its very voice. Like Burns or Hardy, his intensely local experience is recognised as something felt everywhere, and at all times.

A word or two must be said about why it has taken us so long to know him, and a word or two of thanks to that small group of scholars who during the last seventy years have made this possible. His resurgence, his 'wearing into sunshine', began in 1919 when Edmund Blunden, a young poet home from the trenches, and living coincidentally just outside Clare, Suffolk, saw what was really the last of Clare's world. All the signposts and all the farming around Blunden's cottage said 'Clare'. The villages were isolated and full of poverty—and of wildlife. Seeing all this, Clare's realism, intellect and lyricism haunted Blunden. Why was such a powerful writer known only by a couple of anthology pieces, one of them admittedly

the superb 'I Am'? What lay below these and the cautious little selections of the late nineteenth century? A whole mine of poetry, as it happened, and one still being worked. So we are grateful to Edmund Blunden, J.W. and Anne Tibble, Geoffrey Summerfield, and especially to Eric Robinson for bringing John Clare, so bright and complete, and sometimes so dark, into his rightful twentieth century place.

Nor can the long asylum years be put aside for this happy occasion, when we carve his name between Matthew Arnold's and Caedmon's. The four years at Epping and the twenty-three years at Northampton, were not a silence. They were filled with the poetry of exile: angry, tender, tragic. He had been put away, as they said. He was in the kingdom of Hölderlin, Collins, Christopher Smart, of Blake, perhaps, and of his favourite William Cowper. It was as dreadful for him as it was for them. His later work proves how much of Helpston remained within him until the end. When his old neighbours died he liked to give their address as 'tenant of the meadow' or 'tenant of the field', and it is this reminder of his Eden being no staying place, and of its cyclic nature, with the farming seasons remorselessly following each other, which gives his *poetry* its pace and strength. Henry James, attending the funeral of Robert Browning here, imagined the welcome by the 'corporate company so thick under the Abbey's high arches'. Those named here, he said, were a company in possession of immortality.

CHAPTER V

Clare's Two Hundredth Birthday

In Helpston Parish Church on the Poet's 200th Birthday.

I must first give thanks to the Clare Society itself for the great understanding and affection which it shows towards John Clare. Barely a decade old itself, it does him proud. Ghosts cannot blush, but if the shade of that small figure who knew this ancient interior is present, then it will be startled by the warmth of our feelings and the depth of our admiration. He would have remembered not only his own birthday but that of his twin sister. It was she who they believed would survive. Clare obliges us to shed whatever intellectual trappings we possess when, once a year, we journey to his village to talk and walk where his circumscribed yet boundary-less life was lived. We are in a little world writ large because of the great things he found here, and it becomes a condition of our being able to come close to him to recover our own simplicity. He is in a sense our common ancestor, for the majority of us have family trees rooted in farms and fields. John Clare tells us who and what we were not so very long ago by giving a full account of who he was, a gift which, as we know, cost him his freedom and his necessary Joys.

Thoughts on John Clare on his bi-centenary, thoughts which were given an extra stimulus when I found myself reading a tiny book containing some of William Barnes's poems sent to me by my old friend J.L. Carr. Maybe he is here with us at this moment so that I can tell him yet again, modest writer that he is, that he is a master of the conte, that difficult form of the long short-story. But some twenty years ago he began to issue from his Kettering press a series of small literary maps and selections which acted like bait, so that I and all his readers were soon swallowing, William Barnes, for instance. The Barnes volume, if one can call it that, arrived when I was helping to edit the New Wessex edition of the Works of Thomas Hardy. In it I read the matchless 'Linden Lea', 'Woak Hill' and 'Wife a-Lost'. John Clare was eight when Barnes was born and there is little or no evidence to show that either poet knew anything of the other's existence. And yet each dealt with the persistent sadness of rural life, with that indefinable melancholy which is so large a part of 'feeling', and so less a part of 'condition'. Robert Bridges, who had once written Barnes off in a letter to Gerard Manley Hopkins, received a sharp reply. 'I hold your contemptuous opinion a mistake. Barnes is a perfect artist. It is as if Dorset Life and Landscape had taken flesh and blood in the man'. We now know that two of England's greatest poets, Hopkins and Hardy, were in a sense taught by Barnes. Similarly, we also know that all rural writing has taken flesh and blood from John Clare. Geoffrey Grigson said that Barnes sent his work to the local newspaper and, other than paste his cuttings into a home-made brown paper album, forgot

all about it. 'I wrote them, so to say, as if I could not well help it, the writing of them was not work but like the playing of music'.

He also wrote them in the Dorset dialect, which sent the anthology editors, when they came to them, wild. Why the local speech, so accurately caught and written down, yet surely so limiting? Because only it could capture the sadness and the tenderness of the field people and, as with Clare, the enormity of displacement. In 'Woak Hill' a widower and his children and the furniture are moving to another cottage, and he is careful to put out his hand to lead his wife's ghost to it. Her name was Mary. E.M. Forster said that if one read this poem without tears—then one had not succeeded in reading it. And Hardy said that "'Woak Hill" has been matched by few singers below the best'. If I was an English teacher, I would add, 'Compare with John Clare's "The Flitting"'. Observe the spiritual upheaval of the short village house-move and learn what once shook the family soul.'

Due to the long asylum years Clare missed out on some of the contacts he might have made with some of the rural writers of the mid-nineteenth century. But then so did Barnes and Hopkins, and where his poetry was concerned, so did Thomas Hardy, all of whose work in this respect received an essentially twentieth century recognition. Our essential duty is not to read Clare for his copious sociology, natural history and linguistics alone, endlessly instructive though he is, but as the major poet of the English village. Today of all days is when we have to hear what he meant us to hear. His restless pencil and scratchy pen would sometimes have been at work in this church and in the lane outside. All in all he was writing about those big mistakes which we all make, those losses which we all suffer, about the guilty bliss of being alone, about desire, about seesawing craziness and levelheadedness, about friendship, about women and sex, about plodding along in some dull furrow. About the glory of birds and flowers. He is far nearer to us than time will admit.

Coleridge, whom Clare once met, defending the language in which he and Wordsworth wrote *Lyrical Ballads*, objected to rural speech being called 'the *real* language of Men'. He said, 'I object in the very first instance to an equivocation in the use of the word "real". Every man's language varies according to the extent of his knowledge, the activity of his faculties, and the depth and quickness of his feelings. For "real" therefore, we must substitute ordinary *lingua communis*. And this is no more to be found in the phraseology of low and rustic life than in any other class.' Scholars here today have revealed the extent of Clare's knowledge, where natural history was concerned equal if different to that of many professionals of his time. But all he knew and understood is subsumed in poetry. That Helpston recognised this is made plain in Greg Crossan's full and enthralling accounts of Clare's funeral here on 25th May 1864 and the first centennial celebration of July 1893, which were both comprehending of his genius and lavish in their pride and affection. Yet during his lifetime we know that his 'right to song' was constantly undermined by helpers

and critics alike, troubling him deeply and contributing to his 'shipwreck'. But as we know, his muse remained unquestioning and unfailing.

CHAPTER VI

The Dangerous Idyll

Lecture given to the Royal Society of Literature, 1975.

Extreme though it may sound, any literary undertaking by an English villager has until quite recently, by which I mean the late nineteenth century, been received with much the same suspicion as novels and poetry written by English women. Each, by daring to produce literature had broken through ancient orderly concepts of their functions. So at best they were odd and ingenious, and at worst unnatural. John Clare didn't object to being called a peasant and was great enough not to demand that he should always be referred to as a poet. What helped to cripple him was the term 'peasant-poet', with its freakish implications. But this is what he was called and the terrible conflict between his 'condition' and his genius raged until it exploded into that vast, silencing affirmation, 'I Am'. Twice he made this huge nameless statement, perhaps an imitation of the profound claim he had heard Yahveh make during the First Lesson in the village church, though each time there was never a hint of pride or blasphemy. Just the fact of John Clare. I first 'I Am' poem is such a perfect expression of a man's discovery of himself as superfluous, unneeded and abandoned, that it speaks for every ignored man. The second 'I Am' poem, a sonnet, is different. It is Clare's apology for being a poet:

I feel I am, I only know I am,
 And plod upon the earth as dull and void;
 Earth's prison chilled my body with its dram
 Of dullness, and my soaring thoughts destroyed.
 I fled to solitude from passion's dream
 But strife pursued: I only know I am.
 I was a being created in the race
 Of men, disdaining bounds of place and time;
 A spirit that could travel o'er the space
 Of earth and heaven—like a thought sublime,
 Tracing creation, like my Maker, free
 A soul unshackled like eternity:
 Spurning earth's vain and soul-debasing thrall
 But now I only know I am? that's all.

What is a man's identity? Of what does it actually consist? That self which only he can feel and see? Or the conglomerate of job, address, appearance, class, and inherited name by which society recognises him? How many a man, harnessed for life to what Geoffrey Grigson once called 'the penal labour of farm work', must have told himself 'I am' during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. And where such trapped lives were concerned, the nineteenth century ended during the 1940s.

Here I shall be mostly concerned with those who broke the harmonious rules of rural England by freeing themselves from such permissible literary expressions as ballads, folk-songs, saws and tales, eloquent and genuine though such things can be, and, by accepting themselves as very special 'beings created in the race of men', soared far beyond the words and music popularly associated with the fields. I shall also try to show how the great classic vision of the English countryside which the Augustans created, and which writers such as Clare, Bloomfield, Hardy and Burns challenged, which John Constable celebrated and which Jane Austen satirised, is not at all the same country vision which more and more occupies the conservationists of our own day.

The face of England, as thousands of sunny modern guidebooks like to describe it, has remained wonderfully serene and unmarked in spite of the polluters. Neither its contemporary environmental problems nor its past tragedies—the Industrial Revolution, Micheldever, Tolpuddle, the clearances and enclosures, the squalid cottages which it upset John Constable to enter, the signs of greed and pride in the park—have marked it in such a way that its central beauty and inspiration have been defaced. In fact, we are at the beginning of a new cycle of reverence towards the countryside and its far from simple conditions. These we intuitively recognise as the result of a practical compromise made between the claims of neo-classical pastorals and intensive farming. The result of this combination has never been a particularly happy one for the ordinary countryman. It has had a way of limiting him in the eyes of the sophisticated, who see him as admirable but quaint. Quaintness is one of the things which Clare rejected when he cried, 'I am!' His father could sing ballads by the fireside and not make those who heard him feel uncomfortable. But when Clare read his first poems to his parents, or to the neighbours, he pretended that they were by someone else—an educated person—so that they did not have to feel that they were living with a kind of monster. And people still like village folk to 'fit', to stand upright and reassuring in the little innocent niches sentiment has carved out for them. They like to imagine village life as one of lasting and unchanging verities. To view it intellectually is thought vaguely treacherous.

Clare, when writing his autobiography, says that he was born in 'a gloomy village in Northamptonshire'. Gloomy or not, the sight of a single violet on Primrose Hill in London once caused him to hurry home to it. The incident illustrates the key factor in village experience: the fatal involvement, the need to remain. Robert Bloomfield wrote his

enormously successful *The Farmer's Boy* while he was working as a shoemaker in London. The poem was an act of nostalgia, for himself and for all his readers. Its appalling effect was to cut him off from his own village involvement for ever.

John Clare did the harder thing. He stayed in 'gloomy' Helpston although from childhood on his isolation was to be intense. 'I live here among the ignorant like a lost man.' Charles Lamb advised him in his kindly fashion to do what all sensible poets did and 'transport Arcadia to Helpston'. It was civilised advice inasmuch as it made clear to Clare that Lamb, by suggesting that the young ploughman was quite capable of using classical allusions and imagery, did not think of him as a peasant poet. Yet Lamb had not understood. 'Gloomy' Helpston—how the ecstatic nature poems refute the adjective!—was Arcady where Clare was concerned. When they forced him to live in a cottage only three miles away from this village which was part of him, he became mentally ill. And when they carried him to Northampton Asylum he eventually had to find a new persona to inhabit and chose, among others, Lord Byron's.

'That is where learning gets you!' his old mother believed. She thought learning 'the blackest arts of witchcraft' and Helpston itself thought reading was synonymous with sloth. From about twelve years onward, Clare lived a furtive, aberrant existence, hiding in woods with his books, hoarding old sugar-bags to write on, muttering behind the plough. The village verses which, a century later, collectors like Cecil Sharp and Sabine Baring-Gould were to rescue from oblivion for the English Folk-Song Society, were, for Clare, so much trash. For him they merely reflected the ignorance from which he was determined to escape. When he was thirteen, a young weaver showed him a scrap of Thomson's *The Seasons*. Now, if ever there was a single poem which moulded, sensitised, sentimentalised, elevated, and generally formed the British character during the eighteenth century it was *The Seasons*. It has been credited with being one of the chief agents to bring a spirit of tenderness and humanity to brutal Georgian England. For all that, the young weaver had no time for it because he was a Methodist. But he showed the scrap of it he possessed to this strange boy, who read these four lines, and was saved. Or lost. It all depends upon the value one places upon restless spiritual inquiry at the cost of contentment. These are the four lines:

Come, gentle Spring, ethereal mildness, come,
And from the bosom of yon dropping cloud,
While music wakes around, veil'd in a shower
Of shadowing roses, on our plains descend ...

It isn't much, is it? And it is even less when we recall several hundred lines like it. But the fact is that for the path-seeking Clare the fragment hung in the workaday air of Helpston, changing everything. His experience had something in common with that of James

Northcote, the artist, who told Hazlitt that he had been life-long affected by an actor singing Shakespeare's 'Come unto these yellow sands, and then take hands', and that he felt it to be a kind of weakness or folly on his part. Hazlitt's reply was, 'There is no danger of that sort—all the real taste and feeling in the world is made up of what people take in their heads in this manner.'

There was precious little taste or feeling connected with what next happened at Helpston. Unable to find time or even sufficient smoothed out sugar-bags to establish the stream of poetry which Thomson's four lines had set flowing, Clare began what he called his 'muttering'. In other words, he spoke his poems softly into the Northamptonshire air, repeating the words many times until they no longer disappeared on the wind, but remained with him as whole and recognisable acts of creation. It was about this period, 1812, that poor Robert Bloomfield was reversing this process. His descent from the unsettling fame which *The Farmer's Boy* had brought him now included an attempt to make money by selling Aeolian harps. So, while he heard that Murray the publisher had given 'Parson Crabbe £3,000 for his *Tales*', Bloomfield had nothing more to offer *his* readers but simple home made instruments to whine wordlessly in a gale. There is no evidence that they sold. And so we have this curious pen-less moment in the lives of the two poets, the once lionised Bloomfield hawking his wind-harps and the still unknown Clare entrusting the Northamptonshire air with his poetry because there was no other place for it.

As one can imagine, Helpston did not take kindly to this muttering boy. Nor did the Marquess of Exeter's Master of the Kitchen Garden, who employed him. The persecution proper began at this point. So superb a creature had the master gardener seemed to Clare that, when applying for a job, he had sunk on his knees before him. The mockery being more than he could stand, he fled to the open fields. The fields to any village are its sea. The rancour and glances, the creeds and criticisms of the village centre, cannot be contained there. Solitude and the elemental processes of the growing year take over. People were always suggesting that the more refined task of gardening would suit such a delicate person but Clare found, throughout his working life, that labouring in a great field provided the best conditions for his happiness and his art. Eventually, it was his inability to do this work, as much as anything else, which hurried him towards madness. Poets like Shelley might attempt to rouse his rural workers with,

Men of England, wherefore plough
—For the lords who lay ye low?
The seed ye sow, another reaps,
The wealth ye find, another keeps ...

but John Clare, England's most articulate village voice, remained untouched by such revolutionary ideas. He ploughed in order to perfect what he called his 'descriptive rhyming'. Each night he wrote these spoken poems down and each day some of them vanished, as though mice had got hold of them—though it was only his mother stealing them 'for her own use as occasion called for them'. She thought he was only practising pothooks. But the realisation that the ploughboy was up to something, with his mutterings and hidings, his starings at flowers and his traipsing after books to Stamford, soon leaked out, and the laughing began. When we read Clare's frequent references to it we at once appreciate that this was no ordinary touchiness but a flinching from what George Herbert once described as 'the mockery of murderers'.

The unnaturalness of Clare offended like the unnaturalness of writers such as Lady Winchilsea, the Duchess of Newcastle, Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, and George Eliot when they claimed the same authors' rights as men. In fact, when Lady Winchilsea scathingly attacked the system which allowed only males access to full literary expression, her words are curiously relevant to writers such as Clare whose 'condition' barred them from normal consideration as artists:

How are we fallen!
 Fallen by mistaken rules,
 And Education's more than Nature's fools;
 Debarred from all improvements of the mind,
 And to be dull, expected and resigned;
 And if someone would soar above the rest,
 With warmer fancy, and ambition pressed,
 So strong the opposing faction still appears,
 The hopes to thrive can ne'er outweigh the fears.

Nothing finally outweighed the fears of Clare, as we know. We also know that he routed the picturesque pastoral and returned the landscape to its natural contours in the English imagination. The most overwhelming thing in his life was the revelation that he was no versifying rustic but a total poet. This knowledge was both terrible and wonderful. And Helpston's laughter was probably generated as much by fear as by amusement.

For most of the eighteenth century a policy of moral and aesthetic containment had concealed a good deal of the pressures which were drastically altering the lives of the village people, still at this period the nation's largest labouring force. Because this containment was not imposed entirely from the top but possessed many deep cultural and religious elements springing from the people themselves, there were periods of classic harmony which, particularly during the famine which followed Napoleon's defeat in 1815, were looked back

on by all classes as the golden years. Lord Ernle in his *History* says that the 1750s were the Golden Age of English agriculture. This euphoric memory seems to have resulted from the elegant propaganda disseminated by various painters, poets, landscape-gardeners and architects during the golden age itself, for in 1769 we have Oliver Goldsmith sending his new poem *The Deserted Village* to Sir Joshua Reynolds with the following letter attached:

How far you may be pleased with the versification and mere mechanical parts of this attempt, I do not pretend to enquire: but I *know* you will object (and indeed several of our best and wisest friends concur in the opinion) that the depopulation it deplores is *no where to be seen*, and the disorders it laments are only to be found in the poet's imagination. To this I can scarce make any other answer, than that I sincerely believe what I have written, that I have taken all possible pains in country excursions for these past four or five years to be certain of what I allege, and that all my views and enquiries have led me to believe those miseries real ... In regretting the depopulation of the countryside, I inveigh against the increase of our luxuries, and here also I expect the shout of modern politicians against me.

What had happened, of course, was that the unsightly inhabitants of Auburn had been tidied away to make a park. They had been resettled, as a matter of fact, though this was not the point. Like those of many a native in our own day, their ancestral homes and fields had to make way for 'civilisation'. *The Deserted Village* remains a lasting indictment of those who shift a native community for their own convenience. For generations, on the principle that it couldn't happen here, the English liked to believe that Goldsmith's 'country excursions' must have taken place in his native Ireland, where things were different. But, as we know, Sweet Auburn was Nuneham Courtenay, Oxfordshire. And what Goldsmith was witnessing was a scene which, for a very different reason than the beautifying of a peer's new house, was soon to be familiar all over Britain. For the cruel if logical process by which the small independent farming units created by the manorial system were rationalised by 'enclosure' was soon to affect the country people. The enclosure of Helpston runs as a disturbing counterpoint to the lyricism of Clare's poetry. Few villagers, however, were to describe these profound changes for, as Crabbe said,

Few, amid the rural tribe, have time
To number syllables, and play with rhyme.

George Crabbe, however, was the exception to every statement made about the peasant-poet for, having been born into the labouring classes and having heard, seen and experienced all their emotions, he totally and absolutely severed the connection when he

became an established writer. The impetus behind his verse-tales is neither nostalgia nor enlightenment but a fastidious disenchantment with provincial life. He gazed at the individuals in the harsh little Suffolk community which he had abandoned with much the same dissecting accuracy as when his eye searched out the minute flora of the bitter shingle beach and the lonely marsh, except that he was apt to save his lyricism for the latter. He made no bones about his 'having fled from those shores'. 'Few men who have succeeded in breaking through the obscurity of their birth have retained so little trace of their origin,' remarked his son. Crabbe certainly made no bones about presenting his grimly brilliant anti-idyll in the same poetic form, the heroic couplet, in which Pope and other eighteenth century writers had manufactured the idyll itself. These rhymed novels were packed with the sights and sounds which one was not supposed to see or hear on an excursion to the coast or to the fields. Worst of all, Crabbe had the audacity to examine the mores of his own tribe as though he were some visiting inspector. It was as if Margaret Mead had been a South Sea Islander. Yet, as E.M. Forster said,

To talk about Crabbe is to talk about England ... He grew up among poor people, and he has been called their poet. But he did not like the poor. When he started writing, it was the fashion to pretend that they were happy shepherds and shepherdesses, who were always dancing, or anyhow had hearts of gold ... but Crabbe's verdict on the working classes is unfavourable. And when he comes to the richer and more respectable ... he remains sardonic, and sees them as poor people who haven't been found out ... To all of them, and to their weaknesses, he extends a little pity, a little contempt, a little cynicism, and a much larger portion of reproof. The bitternesses of his early experiences had eaten into his soul ...

During the summer of 1787, soon after Crabbe had published *The Village*, another country poet, William Cowper, for whom this had been a miserable, worrying year and who, to keep the Black Dog at bay, was reading anything and everybody, read at last the poems by Robert Burns which for months had been astonishing the literary world. Burns was twenty-eight and a ploughman, albeit on his brother's farm. Working a little Scottish farm was as penurious then as it was to be in the 1920s, when many a younger brother, tired of being the unpaid family hired hand, emigrated to East Anglia, to fall upon those stagnant but promising acres and make his fortune. Robert Burns's object in publishing his poems was not to celebrate his oneness with the village of Mossgiel but to make enough money to get off the land altogether and sail to Jamaica and work on a plantation. Cowper read these now famous poems with bewilderment. In fact ...

I have read them *twice*; and though they be written in a language that is new to me ... I think them, on the whole, a very extraordinary production. He is, I believe, the only poet these kingdoms have produced in the lower rank of life since Shakespeare ... who need not be indebted for any part of his praise to a charitable consideration of his origin, and the disadvantages under which he has laboured. It will be a pity if he should not hereafter divest himself of barbarism, and content himself with writing pure English.... He who can command admiration dishonours himself if he aims no higher than to raise a laugh....

William Cowper, that gentlest, kindest of men and one who lived in the deep Buckinghamshire countryside with all the charity, simplicity and good taste of a Mr Knightley, and is as far from being a Sweet Auburn tyrant as could be imagined, remains none the less a devotee of the Augustan doctrine of rural harmony and neo-classical order. Although he cannot avoid the fact that Robert Burns is a genius, neither can he avoid the implications of that wild free language. And so, with a terribly similar reflex action to that of the Helpston villagers when confronted by John Clare, Cowper laughs.

Cowper's feeling for the countryside was the purest distillation of the old conservative attitudes—those same attitudes which still flow through so much of the vast literature we annually produce to congratulate ourselves on our rural basis. A writer can let himself go on the iniquities of the city but the village remains critically sacrosanct.

Cowper's *Letters*, in which village joy and sorrow are so perfectly conveyed, was John Constable's favourite book, and he died with it in his hand. The greatest painter of the English romantic movement was a revolutionary on canvas only, and the superb series of Suffolk riverside paintings which he created during the years immediately following Waterloo, and which have since been called 'the landscape of every English mind', were, in effect, a marvellous apologia for Tory-Augustan 'order', as well as being 'true to Nature'. Looking at them now, it is impossible to believe that while they were being produced, labourers rioted and were lighting bonfires on the hills, that on one occasion at least things had got so out of hand that both the squire and rector had fled, and that Captain Swing was in the neighbourhood. Constable himself travelled constantly from Soho to East Bergholt to refresh himself at the 'fountain-head', as he called it, of all he worshipped and understood. To him, the pattern of life in the Stour Valley, an eighteenth-century creation so far as he could appreciate it, was a divine one.

Post-war famine, Enclosure, and the strange, unknown pressures brought about by the industrial revolution were behind the disorders of East Bergholt. The 1817 map of the Village on which its inhabitants stated their claims before Enclosure shows that all John Constable claimed was the cottage he bought, while still a boy, to turn into a studio. But many, as elsewhere, were unable to claim anything because of illiteracy or ignorance, and

were made paupers. When Constable heard of the sufferings of these villagers, he sent blankets from London, that basic charitable gesture. But when he heard that the Suffolk and Essex labourers were forming protective unions—those little men who carry on with their quiet tasks in his great pictures—he was shocked and angry. Archdeacon Fisher, his friend, had a more sympathetic attitude. He and his family were virtually isolated by thousands of starving country people. He saw their desperate attempts to band themselves together as a natural reaction to the disaster which was engulfing them; Constable, on the other hand, saw them only as an evil menace to the God-ordained pattern of rural life. His warnings to Archdeacon Fisher were harsh and to the point. ‘Remember that I know these people well. There are no such corrupt hordes as any set of mechanics who work in a shop together as a party...’ A century and a half later the Agricultural Workers’ Union is still looked at by some as a development which the beautiful British countryside could well do without.

Meanwhile, as the ‘union’ workhouses went up, to the best Benthamite designs, to shelter large numbers of displaced peasants, the scenery Constable worshipped intensified its spiritual hold over him. ‘Nothing can exceed the beauty of the country’, he wrote. ‘It makes pictures seem trumpery.’

When the long peace between the gentlemen and the peasants was broken by the rationalisation of what remained of the manorial system, the contrast between the two rural cultures was often so extreme that the baronet in his park could feel that he was surrounded, not so much by his countrymen as by savages. The work forces were moving towards the time when they no longer possessed faces, only ‘hands’. ‘Osbert’, remarked Sir George Sitwell, staring across Sheffield, ‘do you realise that there is nobody between us and the Locker-Lampsons?’ Even good Archdeacon Fisher told Constable that it wasn’t because he and his wife had to run a private welfare state for a great tract of Berkshire that he was so depressed, it was because ‘there is nobody we can meet’. Both he and Constable continued to revel in the new concepts of Nature as described by Wordsworth. ‘Every step I take, and to whatever object I turn my eye,’ said the artist, ‘that sublime expression in the Scriptures, “I am the resurrection and the life”, seems verified about me,’—except, that is, when he caught sight of the inhabitants of this beautiful country, when he was obliged to add, ‘The poor people are dirty and to approach one of the cottages is almost insufferable.’

The threat to the idyll flutters nervously—though usually so slightly that it escapes ordinary detection—in the novels of Jane Austen. And, of course being Jane Austen, she puts it to good comic use, no more so than when, in *Emma*, she allows that peerless girl to wed Mr Knightley because his presence in the house will be an added protection against someone who is stealing hens from the hen-run. Why, it may be asked, is Mr Woodhouse so jumpy? Why did ‘poor Miss Taylor’, by marrying Mr Weston and going off to live in a house only *half a mile* from Hartfield, create such difficulties? Emma, who is only nineteen and in flourishing health, had once walked to the Westons, ‘but it was not pleasant’. *Why* wasn’t it

pleasant? When Harriet Smith and her school friend, two other excessively healthy teenage ladies, had taken a walk and encountered a gypsy family, they behaved as hysterically as though they had run into cannibals. Why? When Jane Fairfax is seen strolling by herself across the meadows to the post office, the consequent consternation concerning her safety could not have been greater had she been making off for 'Switzerland'. Critics have dwelt upon the hermetic quality of Jane Austen's country society, 'Two or three families', etc., being her ideal recipe for fiction, but what really lies behind all this witty terror of the ordinary agricultural background? Jane Austen's interpretation of Augustanism is to present the park as paradise. It is unnatural or unwise to wish to leave, or to leave, paradise.

The novel's climaxes are created by the author's allowing this delicious country paradise to make moral collisions with the sane heart of the English countryside as she recognised it. The scene in which a young working farmer is thought 'too low' for silly Harriet by proud Emma, and then turns out to be the *friend* of Mr Knightley himself, is one of many which steady the comic impulse in this, the wittiest novel in the language. The laughter in Jane Austen's villages is always at the expense of dishonesty and affectation, the tears at the threat of destruction of any part of a unique rural civilisation.

But if Harriet's young farmer is so low that Emma has to include him in the yeomanry, which is 'precisely the order of people with whom I feel I can have nothing to do', what hope of salvation is there for Hodge himself? None—in the literary sense—beyond those utilitarian appearances when either he or his wife clump by on the way to toil. No wonder that the poor creature bursts out laughing at the charades which are supposed to be going on above his head, so to speak. Now and then they go on a bit more than he can bear, and then he lets fly. William Hazlitt heard such an outburst with shock and disbelief at the extraordinary effect it had on him. He was used to mockery—but he hardly expected it from this quarter.

His favourite hide-out was Winterslow, the Wiltshire village introduced to him by Sarah Stoddart, his uncomfortable wife, and the proto-New Woman. There Hazlitt's own special concept of rural bliss—lying on his back on a sunny hillside, doing absolutely nothing—could be indulged while Sarah hiked. But one fatal day he read a book while drinking in the village pub and something was said, and then somebody laughed. For an ugly moment the lettered and the unlettered out-stared each other from their incommunicable solitudes. Then Hazlitt the radical, the eloquent defender of the village people of England against the horrible proposals of the Reverend Mr Malthus, unleashed such a tirade against country loutishness as no squarson could even have imagined:

All country people hate each other! They have so little comfort, that they envy their neighbours the small pleasures or advantage, and nearly grudge them selves the necessities of life. From not being accustomed to enjoyment, they become hardened

and averse to it—stupid, for want of thought, selfish for want of society. There is nothing good to be had in the country, or if there is, they will not let you have it. They had rather injure themselves than oblige anyone else. Their common mode of life is a system of wretchedness and self-denial, like what we read of among barbarous tribes. You live out of the world...You cannot do a single thing you like; you cannot walk out or sit at home, or write or read, or think or look as if you did, without being subject to impertinent curiosity. The apothecary annoys you with his complaisance, the parson with his superciliousness. If you are poor you are despised; if you are rich you are feared and hated. If you do anyone a favour, the whole neighbourhood is up in arms; the clamour is like that of a rookery...There is a perpetual round of mischiefmaking and backbiting for want of any better amusement...There are no shops, no taverns, no theatres, no opera, no concerts, no pictures...no books or knowledge of book. Vanity and luxury are the civilisers of the world, and sweeteners of human life. Without objects either of pleasure or action, it grows harsh and crabbed. The mind becomes stagnant the affections callous...Man left to himself soon degenerates into a very disagreeable person. Ignorance is always bad enough, but rustic ignorance is intolerable...The benefits of knowledge are never so well understood as from seeing the effects of ignorance, in their naked, undisguised state, upon the common country people. Their selfishness and insensibility are perhaps less owing to the hardships and privations, which make them, like people out at sea in a boat, ready to devour one another, than to their having no idea of anything beyond themselves and their immediate sphere of action...Persons who are in the habit of reading novels...are compelled to take a deep interest in...the thoughts and feelings of people they never saw...Books, in Lord Bacon's phrase, 'are a discipline of humanity'. Country people have none of these advantages...and so they amuse themselves by fancying the disasters and disgraces of their particular acquaintance. Having no hump backed Richard to excite their wonder and abhorrence, they make themselves a bugbear...out of the first obnoxious person they can lay their hands on...All their spare time is spent in manufacturing the lie for the day...The common people in civilised countries are a kind of domesticated savage. They have not the wild imagination, the passions, the fierce energies, or dreadful vicissitudes of the savage tribes, nor have they the leisure, the indolent enjoyments and romantic superstitions which belong to the pastoral life in milder climates. They are taken out of a state of nature, without being put in possession of the refinements of art.

Invective aside, there was plenty of truth in Hazlitt's rage. Lost, that was what the country people of England were in 1817, when this censure of them appeared. The

condemnation was published just a few months after *Emma* and at the very moment when John Constable had begun the marvellous series of Stour Valley landscapes, each with its sprinkling of minuscule boatmen and field-workers, with which he hoped to establish himself in the eyes of the Royal Academy. It was during the period which saw the publication of Crabbe's last poems. Byron thought Crabbe's subject-matter 'coarse and impractical', and the majority of people found the workaday village life of Constable's paintings 'too low' to hang in their drawing-rooms. As for John Clare, those whose taste for rural life had been conditioned by schoolroom immersions in Virgil and Homer, and later lessons from *The Seasons*, or even by William Wordsworth, saw in this great poet little more than a clumsy kind of precocity.

In 1871—the beginning of the decade in which there was a disastrous combination of great rains and efficient grain-ships from the Canadian and American ports through which poured the harvests from fabulous prairie farms—rural England slipped once more into depression. Its agriculture was literally washed out and, except for brief government protection during the First World War, it would remain stagnant until 1940. Country people fled in their hundreds of thousands from the stagnant scene. They went into the railways, into service, into factories, to the colonies and into limbo. All this while the land itself began to receive a new veneration, this time from the tycoons of the Industrial Revolution who needed a great many acres of it in order to support the titles which began to come their way during the 1880s. Their efforts to assimilate the rural-based culture of the old landed families created much of the drama in late Victorian fiction.

It was in 1871 that Tinsley the publisher put out a mystifying novel called *Desperate Remedies*. The reviews were mixed, as they say. The story was anonymous but contained such expert descriptions of girls getting dressed that the general opinion was that the author was a woman. The novel was also found to be 'disagreeable' and 'full of crimes', although some critics were able to trace in it a new kind of 'awe' and noticed that the 'humble actors' exhibited powers which had 'previously been ignored in peasant society'. Thomas Hardy, who was thirty-one, read the worst of these reviews, that in the *Spectator*, while perched on a Dorset stile, and the bitterness remained with him until the end of his life. The decision to forsake architecture for literature had been hard, and immediately after posting off *Desperate Remedies* to the publisher he had gloomily underlined in his copy of *Hamlet* the words: 'Thou would'st not think how ill all's here about my heart: but it is no matter!' It was certainly a more tentative summing-up of his literary temerity than Clare's, who at the end was able to say,

A silent man in life's affairs
 A thinker from a boy,
 A peasant in his daily cares,

A poet in his joy. (*Later Poems*, II, p. 845)

A few weeks later, this time while reading Smith and Son's remainder list on Exeter station, Thomas Hardy found *Desperate Remedies* offered at 25. 6d. and was so upset that he wrote to Macmillan's, to whom he had sent another novel, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, demanding the return of his manuscript. He would, he told his sweetheart in Cornwall, 'banish novel-writing for ever'.

Then, pragmatically for one who was to be such a key figure in the unification of the lettered and the unlettered cultures of England, Hardy set about earning his living designing buildings for the London School Board. All the same, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, with its hero based upon the man who brought the author's father his building materials, was published a year later; and now both critics and readers began what was to be the slow, touchy, self-examining process of allowing ordinary village people access to the passion, imagination, feeling and eloquence previously reserved for the parks and rectories. For a short period these disconcerting country forces revealed by Hardy managed to entertain the public with their quaint customs and displays of rustic love; but soon, as with George Crabbe, less bearable sights began to intrude. Extraordinary crimes, sex, fatal pressures, pagan strengths which showed no sign of ever having been conquered by Christian ethics. The style, too, was upsetting—'Like sand in honey', Richard le Gallienne called it. And reviewer after reviewer began to echo Cowper's stricture on Burns—'It will be a pity hereafter if he should not divest himself of barbarism and content himself with writing pure English.'

Many years later, when Hardy's genius was recognised, Havelock Ellis made an interesting comment on his success. He said that 'the real and permanent interest in Hardy's books is not his claim to be an exponent of Wessex—i.e. the rural workers—but his intense preoccupation with the mysteries of women's hearts.' And Havelock Ellis goes on to say that what Hardy was finally engaged in, most completely and impermissibly in *Jude the Obscure*, was bringing the instinctive, spontaneous and unregarded aspects of Nature even closer to the rigid routines of human life, making it more human (or inhuman); more moral (or immoral). Hardy was also emphasising the unconsciousness in Nature of everything except her essential law, and he was not in sympathy with a society which believed that it could live according to rules which did not take this law into account. It was the clash between Nature and 'society' which made the necessary conflict in Hardy the writer.

'This conflict', continues Havelock Ellis,

reaches its highest point around women. Truly or falsely, for good or for evil, woman has always been for man the supreme priestess, or the supreme devil, of Nature. 'A woman', says Proudhon—himself the incarnation of the revolt of Nature in the heart of man—'even the most charming and virtuous woman, always contains an element

of cunning, the wild beast element. She is a tamed animal that sometimes returns to her natural instinct. This cannot be said in the same degree of man.' The loving student of the elemental in Nature so becomes the loving student of women, the sensitive historian of her conflicts with 'sin' and with 'repentance'—the creations of man. Not, indeed, that any woman who has 'sinned', if her sin was love, ever really 'repents'. It is probable that a true experience of the one emotional state as of the other remains a little foreign to her, 'Sin having probably been the invention of men who never really knew what love is'.

You will see that we have come a long way from *The Seasons*. You will also see that John Clare and Angel Clare have shares in the same profound rural consciousness.

In 1883 Richard Jefferies published that strange essay *The Story of My Heart* which Elizabeth Jennings rightly sees as a non-Christian equivalent of the mystic abstractions of Traherne. As with Hardy, Jefferies repudiates the notion that a countryside shares the opinions of the human beings who happen to be living in it. By one of those strange coincidences, *The Story of My Heart* appeared at the very same time as John Constable's paintings, which might sound odd. But Constable had died in 1837 leaving some eight hundred unsold, unwanted pictures; and these had remained, hidden and more or less ignored, until half a century later the best of them were given to the nation by his daughter. Thus Constable's superb apology for Augustan harmony, whose claims he had so brilliantly strengthened by his scientific approach to Nature and his revolutionary impressionistic brushwork, burst its way into the country-worshipping hearts of the British at the same moment as the villages had found their native voice. For John Constable, the trees, fields, flowers, rivers and, most of all, the skies lived and moved in concord with the noblest human motives. For Jefferies and Hardy, such things were 'a force without a mind'.

'There is nothing human in nature', said Jefferies.

The earth would let me perish on the ground...Burning in the sky the great sun, of whose company I have been so fond, would merely burn on and make no motion to assist me. The trees care nothing for us: the hill I visited so often in days gone by has not missed me. This very thyme which scents my fingers did not grow for that purpose, but its own...By night it is the same as day: the stars care not, and we are nothing to them...If the entire human race perished at this hour, what difference would it make to the earth?

Such statements wrung much of the contentment out of the simple life and helped to suggest a threatening amoral landscape which Edwardian Hellenists—including E. M. Forster,

Saki, and Forrest Reid—peopled with forsaken Pans and other brooding and resentful stream and woodland deities.

Thomas Hardy himself became angry when his anti-euphoric view of country life was constantly put down to his pessimism. 'All this talk about my pessimism! What does it matter what an author's view of life is? If he finally succeeds in conveying a completely satisfying artistic expression, that is what counts.'

All the same, it *was* the cosmic brutality in his work which, among other things, caused the twentieth-century 'country writer' to try and avoid the excesses of both too much moral illumination and too much pounding darkness. Such avoidances have, of course, led to a stream of innocuous rural *belle-lettrism* unequalled throughout the world and to new versions of the idyll. But they have also led to many of the most serious statements of modern literature. When I think of village literature I think of *Four Quartets* as well as of *Lark Rise to Candleford*.

All post-Hardy writing needs to be assessed against a remarkable work published in 1902, *Rural England*, by Sir Henry Rider Haggard, a Norfolk farmer who usually wrote novels. This is a brilliant, factual, statistical, and apolitical account of the social effects of the last great agricultural depression at, more or less, its midway mark. The author chose a text from the Book of Judges with which to introduce his county-by-county analysis: 'The highways were unoccupied... the inhabitants of the villages ceased.' Reading *Rural England* now it seems scarcely sane that Britain, then able to command an almost inexhaustible wealth, could have permitted such a disaster to have run its course, blighting both the land and those who lived on it. The indifference and callousness shown towards the agricultural workers in particular, many of whom were starving, was appalling. The legacy of this neglect haunts the shires to this day.

Curiously, it was from this wretched scene that the conservationists feverishly began to retrieve a culture which was no longer regarded as belonging to boors but to the essential heart of Britain itself. The Folk-Lore and Folk-Song and Folk-Dance societies copied tirelessly. Dialect experts listened with respect to accents which they knew to be those of Beowulf, Caedmon, Langland, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Johnson and Tennyson. Now conservation of rural culture has grown until it includes conservation of the entire country scene itself. The cottage which Constable found too disgusting to enter in 1820, and which Rider Haggard found deserted and in ruins in 1902, is now 'desirable'. The poor crooked spade hangs safely in the Rural Industries Museum. Everything belonging to the village now belongs to our higher nature. Those who threaten thatch, hedge or peace are now the barbarians. And it is John Clare's village, not Thomson's, which provides the standards for this idyll. The village of the villagers. It is often said that the conservationists of this village are the middle-classes but they are, in most instances, the grandchildren of those who went away.

CHAPTER VII

The Helpston Boys

Boyhood is a recurring theme with John Clare. His own and that of his contemporaries make lively passages in his work. The persistence of the theme is partly deliberate, partly unconscious. He was both recording and re-imagining his time, his geography, his ethos, himself, his companions, with the result that we find it impossible to recognise what he was finally to describe as 'this sad non-identity'. The first and last things which a writer must do is to know what and who he is. Clare had cause to struggle to remember both states. To know that one can never be what one was, as did Coleridge, can be devastating. Rimbaud, amazingly, knew as much at twenty and wrote no more.

John Clare was less a visionary than a remembrancer. All he saw ahead of him was what appeared on countless country tombstones, the word Rest, which was the labourer's description for his final 'escape'. Yet Clare knew that for him there could be neither rest nor escape even when he was an old man in the asylum because he had brought his youthful landscape with him and everyone with whom he had shared it. There he was by the bridge, the fourteen year-old lover. Whatever happened, it was soon put a stop to. Although 'thwarted', his love for Mary Joyce lasted all his life. It was to keep him boyish in this passionate respect, this love between two village children. Rather like Thomas Hardy after forty years of loveless marriage, the courtship which preceded it would grow more wonderful as time passed.

And then, as we know, the 1809 Act for Enclosing Lands in the Parishes of Maxey with Deepingate, Northborough, Glington with Peakirk and Helpstone made 'all that map of boyhood overcast'. We tend to confine Clare in his own parish boundaries but forget that the first instinct of a village boy is to jump over them, so to speak, to go wild out of sight. Clare cursed Enclosure then leaped over it, to where

Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene
 Nor fence of ownership crept inbetween
 To hide the prospect of the following eye
 Its only language was the circling sky?
 One mighty flat undwarfed by bush or tree
 Spread its feint shadow of immensity
 And lost itself which seemed to eke its bounds
 Fence now meets fence in owners little bounds
 Of fields and meadows large as garden grounds
 In little gardens little minds to please

With men and flocks imprisoned ill at ease (*Middle Poems*, II, p. 347)

So 'all that map of boyhood was overcast' by the time Clare was eighteen. Yet during the long last decades of his existence at Northampton, when there would have been no shape or pattern to anything had he not created them, the first country of his love and poetry was given back its every feature. There is frank mourning, rather than nostalgia, but there is as well the happy outdoors of the Georgian village youth in all his toiling, idling, playing state. An account which is unequalled as an inventory because there is no deliberate attempt to list everything. The pros or cons are hard upon each other's heels. For the poet himself

There are spots where I played, there are spots where I loved
 There are scenes where the tales of my choice were approved
 As green as the first—and their memory will be
 The dearest of life's recollections to me—
 The objects seen there in the care of my heart
 Are as fair as the first—and will never depart ('Stanzas', *Later Poems*, I, p. 395)

'Who owns the land?' asks the child who is working at ten years old.

They told me God the land possessed
 The bushes trees and flowers
 That every soul thereon was blest
 And all its joy was ours
 That God they hummed their spirits joy
 Was both the King and Prince
 I saw it when a little boy
 But never found it since

Not on the map of Northamptonshire. Like every county this was filled with noisy labouring children. Clare's *The Shepherd's Calendar* is loud with their singing and shouting, their whistling and general hubbub. A similar hullabaloo fills Parson Woodforde's Diary in which Norfolk boys with Shakespearian names, Brettingham Scurl and Barnabas Woodcock, help to keep the Rectory in an uproar. Clare notes 'the happy dirty driving boy', the 'bawling' herd boy, the merry cries of sliding boys and the fanciful shepherd boy. Shepherds were the proto-poets and seers. He sees the dinner boy, the bird-scaring boy and the boys at the shearing, all of them briefly and wonderfully wild until

Reason like a winters day

Nipt childhoods visions all away
 Those truths are fled and left behind
 A real world and a troubling mind

Clare, of course, as with all artists and writers, failed to have his childhood vision nipt away, hence his grown-up dilemma, hence his genius, hence his suffering and, at long-last recognised, hence his unique achievement. Holding on to his early vision for the rest of his life, he was able to make use of it until the end. Thus his constant refrain of 'When I was a boy' as he began on a very grown-up subject. Take the mindless tradition of the countryman's cruelty to animals, the casual killing of anything which swam, flew or ran by the village boy. The naturalist and the poet have always condemned this sport, but none as painfully as John Clare, and at a time when such slaughter was the chief recreation of the male teenager. Fed by the myths of gamekeepers, blooded by their fathers and employers, curiously excited by badger baiting and the little woodland Tyburns where moles, weasels and other creatures hung in rows as a lesson to every other animal, heartlessly amused by the behaviour of mother birds finding that their nests had been robbed, obscene with frogs, his Helpston boys did no more than every country lad in England did—and would go on doing until film brought the age of enlightenment. Clare balances this infantile killing with the adult killing by sportsmen, and puts both on a par with the new agriculture where 'the axe of the spoiler' destroyed all the tender associative things. 'All levelled like a desert by the never weary plough'. His condemnation strikes a modern note.

Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain
 It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill
 And hung the moles for traitors—though the brook is running still
 It runs a naked stream cold and chill (from 'Remembrances')

Searching for his own cover in order to read, he said, 'It is common in villages to pass judgment on a lover of books as a sure indication of laziness.' Four years earlier William Hazlitt, daring to read in a country inn, was driven out by the jeering labourers. Driven also to write one of his matchless pieces of invective on the special horribleness of rural intolerance. Clare was not alone in his search for concealment. Heaths and copses, pools and warrens, dens and the deep woods were where boys became men. He discovered that he could have a barn all to himself on a Sunday. His first letters were made in barn-dust. It reminds us of William Bewick the engraver who was allowed by the kind vicar to draw his first pictures on the flagstones in the church. Clare condemned the sole use of the Bible and Prayer Book as reading primers in the village school. To make them 'task books' was to put the children off reading altogether.

It is less in his brief *Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself* than in his natural history prose writings that we discover his true boyhood, as it were. For here more even than in *The Shepherd's Calendar* does it unconsciously appear. 'When I was a boy I used to be very curious to watch the nightingale'. The word 'watch' instead of listen is revelatory. 'When I was a boy I kept a tame cock sparrow three years.' 'When I was a boy I was attacked by an owl'. 'When I was a boy there was a little spring of beautiful soft water which was never dry. It used to dribble its way through the grass in a little ripple of its own making, no bigger than a grip or cart-rut. And in this little springhead there would be hundreds of little fish called a minnow. We used to go on Sunday in harvest and deck [bail] it out with a dish and string the fish on rushes ... thinking ourselves great fishers ...' When old and shut away, such limpid boyhood observations would return to him and he would thread them into his poems. Some were threaded into 'Little Trotty Wagtail', written in the asylum when he was fifty-one, and the only poem of his which most people knew until the nineteen-thirties.

—How happy seem

Those schoolboy friendships leaning oer the style

Both reading in one book...

Ah happy boys well may ye turn and smile

When joys are yours that never cost a sigh (from 'Evening Schoolboys')

CHAPTER VIII

Thomas Hardy and John Clare: A Soil Observed, a Soil Ploughed

*The opening lecture for the 11th International Thomas Hardy Conference at Dorchester,
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Every now and then the philosopher-historian stands back from the continual cycle of wars and trade to wonder why, throughout the centuries, it is the warrior who receives the honours, and the man who grows the corn little or no honour at all. The customary reason given for this imbalance is that he who protects the tribe must govern it, and he who feeds it must, well, get on with his work. Both know that springtime and harvest wait for no man, and whoever's task it is to turn with the turning year must abide in his 'condition'. Yet why, persists the philosopher-historian, has this so-called 'condition' to be so low in men's esteem that 'peasant', a word which derives from the old French for a countryman, and which in consequence should have the ring of beauty about it, has instead a ring of what is ignoble? Peasant, says the Oxford English Dictionary, is 'a member of a class of low social status that depends on agricultural labour as a means of subsistence'. Yet who, in a society which devours bread and meat and milk and fruit and wine and beer and fish, does not depend on agricultural labour as a means, not of subsistence, but of existence? So why has Hodge had to stumble his way through history, the living image of all that is considered crude and uncultured, when he himself is the cultivator of everything which sustains life, not to mention the creator of landscapes which inspire poets and painters, and which all of us now venerate?

In the nineteenth century two great English poets spoke for this 'condition' in a language which disturbed their readers. John Clare actually spoke directly from it. Thomas Hardy daringly elevated its so-called simple dramas to what he called 'Sophoclean' heights. John Clare, like Robert Burns, had touched the degrading soil. Thomas Hardy, although closely related to those who ploughed and sowed, had not.

Recent biographers and literary critics have had to face up to both Clare's and Hardy's 'peasant' dilemma in order to make sense of both their genius and their predicament. Robert Gittings reminds us of the large number of labouring folk who were Hardy's relations, and whom he passed by. But I have frequently seen such apparently either snobbish or uncaring attitudes during funerals in our village church. One of the 'old people' dies and, behold, the church is, for half an hour, filled with the indigenous population, many of whom I learn only now belong to the dead person's family. 'Oh, yes, didn't you know, I am his cousin. She is my wife's aunt. That is his nephew, the one who went away ...'. And I have to tell myself that I have witnessed little or no acknowledgement of such relationships

during the lifetime of the deceased. Weddings and funerals apart, closely related village people often have a way of living apart although they share the same few miles. In Clare's and Hardy's day, families were vast and full of secrets regarding blood relationships. They were also rather 'cool'—which was due, maybe, to the unmanageability of sustaining true family feeling on such a scale. And there was, too, that other reason, which I shall come to, for why John Clare and Thomas Hardy behaved as they did towards their roots—that local earth out of which sprang their greatness. To be any kind of writer where one was so deeply rooted could be an awkward business—still can. To be one who needed as much environmental nourishment as the crops themselves could be both a godsend and a disaster. John Clare and Thomas Hardy had everything they required for their inspiration to hand, and they knew it. Yet to translate such common stuff into the finest rural poetry and the finest rural novels in the language carried with it a personal exposure which was hard to bear. As we know to this very day, there is a fugitive aspect to every village. The indigenous writer or artist of any kind blows his own and his neighbours' cover, often injuring both himself and his background in the process. No one will ever know where Hardy and Clare 'got it from'. They are sports: odd, strange individuals who are at one and the same time 'one of us'—and yet clearly not one of us. They see what we refuse to see, or cannot see until it is pointed out to us. They are both reporters or chroniclers, and visionaries.

The conventional nineteenth-century reader was puzzled by what was then called 'peasant poetry'; they allowed for its novelty but nothing more. John Clare's publishers—who had published John Keats—promoted Clare as a second Robert Bloomfield. Bloomfield's long poem *The Farmer's Boy* appeared when Clare was a child—a real farmer's boy, a gardener's boy, pot-boy, a little working lad. It sold 26,000 copies. And Clare himself was always to feel a tender affinity with the Suffolk poet whose origins, single burst of literary success and long years of subsequent neglect pitifully reflected his own background and experience. At the same time Clare, the next generation after Bloomfield, was not like him in any way except in his peasantry. He was more learned, more a naturalist, more a poet and, sadly, more grandly tragic. Robert Bloomfield did not work the soil but was exiled from it. In his famous poem he was a London shoemaker remembering his distant village, and who had become literate by reading the London newspapers. Because of his living in London, his ability to write poetry was less amazing than John Clare's ability to write his. There were no crushing village eyes to dodge. All the same, it was more Bloomfield's novelty value than being a writer in the usual sense which made his work sell. The literary establishment abused Keats for his 'cockney' nerve at daring to invade a classic territory, but it gave Bloomfield a condescending pat on the head. And it did much the same twenty years later when Clare's startling collection *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* appeared in 1820 under the publishers' description of him as 'a Northamptonshire Peasant'—the kind of description which initially crippled Robert Burns.

John Clare was twenty-seven when he met his first and only fame. Not for the next century and a half would his rightful standing as the most direct voice of rural England be acknowledged. 'Where did he get it from?' was the question most asked in his own time. They knew where Mr Wordsworth and Mr Coleridge and Lord Byron got it from—and almost where poor young Keats got it from (not the best source)—but where did this little ploughman get it from? Clare's readers were both genuinely and sensationally interested. His reply to a question which dogged him all his life was, 'I kicked it out of the clods.' The poetry, he meant. The rudeness of the questioning received a rough answer which was no answer at all. It reminds us of Christ's first sermon in his local church, given when he was thirty—late in those days for such a debut. He had unrolled Isaiah and spoken so eloquently that those who had known him all his life were bewildered. 'Where does he get it from? Isn't he the carpenter's son?' They meant that he was not a graduate of the rabbinical schools and that neither until this moment had he shown any gift for language.

Both John Clare and Thomas Hardy were recognised by their mothers as being 'different' or special—or indeed odd. As we know, Hardy's mother (aided by his paternal grandmother) nourished the difference with her stream of dreadful tales about Napoleonic War soldiers, ferocious assize justice, rural melodramas, gossip and scandal. Mrs Clare could neither read nor write and, in her son's words, thought 'that the higher part of learning were the blackest arts of witchcraft'. Inadvertently she fed him with those insecurities which were to haunt the cottages right up to the Second World War. He added, however, that his mother's ambition 'ran high of being able to make me a good scholar as she had experienced enough in her own case to avoid bringing up her children in ignorance'. To make him literate, no more. But not to make him a poet—steer him clear of that, please God. Hardy's mother, on the other hand, was determined to give her son as excellent an education as possible and she offended those who charitably provided what they thought was sufficient learning for such a boy. Mrs Clare—'God help her', wrote her son—had her 'hopeful and tender kindness crossed with difficulty, for there was often enough to do to "keep cart upon wheels", as the saying is, without incurring an extra expense of pulling me to school, though she never lost the opportunity when she was able to send me ? A penny a week could not always be found. But child-labour could. Jemima Hand, his grandmother would have none of this. Hardy seems never to have done anything manual, not even a bit of gardening. John Clare carried sacks of flour from the mill, toiled at The Blue Bell, the pub next to his parents' cottage, gardened for Lord Exeter, planted the quickset hedges around the village after it had been enclosed, and ploughed.

What the two poets did have in common was a physical slightness which could have been due to their difficult births. Clare was the weakest baby of twins—his sister died—and Hardy was thrown into a basket as stillborn until the midwife noticed that there was life in him. Clare was a small handsome man of five foot two- the same height as Keats. Hardy was

taller and with the disproportionate head and body which one often sees in Victorian photographs. Both writers possessed a kind of watchfulness of expression which made them unusual, even beautiful at times. Both adored women. Each suffered and yet was made great because he could only 'breathe' his native air. This air was both vital—and tainted.

Although it is fanciful to dwell on possible meetings between writers, in Clare's case he would never have heard of Thomas Hardy, who was twenty-four when Clare died and had published nothing. The poor, everlastingly scribbling old man in the Northampton Asylum would not have known of Hardy's existence. Many years before, when Clare was in the Epping Asylum, young Alfred Tennyson was living next door and they might well have glimpsed each other, Clare toiling in the rascally Dr Allen's garden and Tennyson writing In Memoriam. Each would have heard the bells of 'Ring out, wild bells!' for they were those of Waltham Abbey. So, Tennyson in mourning, and Clare digging. Being a peasant, it was the policy of nearly all those who tried to help John Clare to set him to manual work.

But it came in handy. Throughout the splendid *The Shepherd's Calendar* we can see the literary strengths of Clare's agricultural skills and expertise. The hand which wrote 'The Nightingales Nest' stacked the sheaves. If Hardy knew of Clare's poems he never mentioned them. His 'Clare' was, of course, William Barnes. Barnes and Clare once wrote with a marvellously similar emotional quality on the same theme—the being forced to leave the old home. Barnes's poem is the unforgettable 'Woak Hill' of which E. M. Forster once said that 'if one has not tears in one's eyes at the end of 'Woak Hill', one has not read it'. John Clare's poem on this subject is 'The Flitting', written after a kind but uncomprehending patron set the poet up in a cottage in a village which was not his own village:

Strange scenes mere shadows are to me
 Vague unpersonifying things
 I love with my old hants to be
 By quiet woods and gravel springs
 Where little pebbles wear as smooth
 As hermits beads by gentle floods
 Whose noises doth my spirits sooth
 And warms them into singing moods

Here every tree is strange to me
 All foreign things where ere I go
 Theres none where boyhood made a swee
 Or clambered up to rob a crow
 No hollow tree or woodland bower
 Well known when joy was beating high

Where beauty ran to shun a shower
And love took pains to keep her dry...

William Barnes is still accused of inaccessibility because of his use of dialect, which astonished me, as it did E. M. Forster and countless other readers who knew nothing of Dorset's local language. Barnes was born eight years after Clare and outlived him by almost a quarter of a century. In the social terms of their day, Barnes the farmer's son, the schoolmaster and clergyman, would have belonged to a realm that was quite dizzily aloft from that the country-folk which he wrote about. And yet he articulates their very souls.

Clare's poetry is the English field given voice. There was no kicking it out of the clods but a profound drawing of it from both the cultivated and uncultivated land of his birthplace. If our farms and wildernesses could utter it would be in his words. His is a uniquely informed utterance. A huge reading as well as a constant contemplation of his native scenery, between them, produced in him a kind of rural scholarship which causes the modern student to alter his or her perception of what it was like to be a farm labourer in late-Georgian Britain. Simply because a shepherd or ploughman could not, or did not, write, we have no reason to believe that he did not feel or see the things which a realistic poet such as John Clare felt and saw. Or indeed, did not share William Barnes's knowledge of the innermost tenderness of humanity. John Clare's gradual collapse of health (exacerbated, as is so often the case, by 'helping hands' and pressures of all kinds) robbed us of what surely would have been one of the most remarkable rural works of all time, a 'peasant' naturalist's version of Gilbert White's classic *The Natural History of Selborne*. Fractions of this wonderful book appear in Margaret Grainger's *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare*.

The land and its workers also speak through Thomas Hardy with an authentic but different voice. It is the voice of the trapped, of men and women who are hedged in as much by what we now call the environment as by their parish boundaries. Not by any other writer is an indigenous group so fatally blown about by localised storms. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, published in 1874 when Hardy was 34, heralded his arrival as a great novelist. In this tale he spreads a few fields and pastures, a few houses, a few short travels in that humdrum direction or this, and a few villagers in stances which have been ordained by local tradition or by classical myths. So far, so familiar. But then Hardy does something not seen before. He gives his characters a double dimension, the one which they recognise and the one by which a Greek playwright would have recognised them. They work incessantly, and time for such business as making love or sightseeing or gossiping has to be snatched. Talk takes place during tasks and if you wanted to do something extraordinary in the improving line, you hoped for a little accident or a brief illness. I once read of a nineteenth-century parson who, walking by a cottage about 9.30 p.m., heard a family singing Wesley's hymns and reproached it for not getting enough sleep to do its fieldwork efficiently. It was not

uncommon for labourers to be given very small gardens so that all their energies went into their master's farm. "Twas a bad leg allowed me to read the *Pilgrim's Progress*", says Joseph Poorgrass. Cain Ball managed a visit to Bath due to a respite from toil caused by having 'a felon upon his finger'. The plot of *Far from the Madding Crowd* is so firmly tied in to the implacable demands of work that an element of its comedy insists that, by right, there should be neither the strength nor the opportunity to do anything else. In Hardy leisure frequently breeds disaster. In *Far from the Madding Crowd*, and like John Clare, he saturates all the common knowledge of his home place with his reading. Hardy's intention, brilliantly realised, was a stylised actuality, the style being that of the classic pastoral, the actuality that of standard farming practice during the time of his mother's youth. He said that he meant to complete this novel 'within a walk of the district in which the incidents are supposed to occur', and that he found it 'a great advantage to be actually among the people described at the time of describing them'.

An advantage, yes, a comfort, no. They were too close for that. A few years later Hardy was to explain what he believed was the purpose of fiction. It was, he said, 'To give pleasure by gratifying the love of the uncommon in human experience, mental or corporeal', this succeeding most when the reader was made to feel that the characters were 'true and real like himself'. The critics were upset. How could farm-labourers ('peasant' was going out by the 1870s) think and hope and behave, well, like us? Whilst admitting that Mr Hardy had 'hit upon a new vein of rich metal for his fictitious scenes', a contemporary critic viewed Hardy's treatment of farm labourers with some irony: 'Ordinary men's notions of the farm labourer of the Southern counties have all been blurred and confused. It has been the habit of an ignorant and unwisely philanthropic age to look upon him as an untaught, unreflecting, badly paid, and badly fed animal, ground down by hard and avaricious farmers, and very little, if at all, raised by intelligence above the brutes and beasts to whom he ministers.'

Such remarks in a review of *Far from the Madding Crowd*, in the *Saturday Review*, shockingly illuminate the predicament of John Clare half a century earlier. In 1823 he was at the pinnacle of his brief celebrity. Here was a peasant writing books! Here was a peasant who had been to London and who had hobnobbed with men of letters, Coleridge, Lamb, Hazlitt. Taylor the publisher, still with the once bestselling Robert Bloomfield in mind, exulted in this phenomenon and he worked hard to polish up Clare's grammar in order that ladies and gentlemen would be able to read his work. In vain the poet protested. The miracle—or novelty—was that he could write verse. It need only be made readable. His publisher promoted Clare but wrecked his poetry, and there was little he could do about it. He was a peasant and had to be guided. The restoration of Clare's text during the 1960s onwards (plus our ever-increasing interest in the countryside) has uncovered a Clare as fresh and captivating as a landscape from which the varnish and dirt of ages have been skilfully removed.

Far from the Madding Crowd is set between two long stretches of agricultural depression and in what historians like to dub 'a golden age'. In his later novels, Hardy would be accused of darkening the English countryside for his own melodramatic purposes. The truth of the matter was that towards the close of the nineteenth century, and a whole hundred years after the birth of John Clare, the lives of Britain's farmworkers had become so poverty-stricken and tragic that the Norfolk novelist Mary Mann, herself a farmer's wife, could look at their lot and presume that only some grim purpose known to God could justify it. In Hardy's essay 'The Dorsetshire Labourer', written in 1883, we have a direct piece of rural sociology which reveals how much he knew of what was going on all around him. And yet he could say, quite truthfully in certain respects, 'that happiness will find her last refuge on earth [among those who till the soil], since it is among them that a perfect insight into the conditions of existence will be longest postponed'. Where ignorance is bliss, in other words.

Impertinent questions drew Clare's response that he kicked his poems out of the clods. Does Thomas Hardy celebrate the life of the (human) clod? Never. This slur on village England he refutes from the very beginning. For one thing, it was too near home. Yet the problem of animating what had, until he began to write, been ignored as being below the level of polite interest, or as being simply lumpen, would have been insuperable had he tried to work it out. But he did not. What he did was to write so superbly about his own people that it made it pointless to ask, 'Why these poor toilers?' Behind him lay the harsh facts of Jemima's youth. All around him lay a mass of inherited material of every kind: the best, the worst. In a poem called 'Spectres that Grieve', one of many which are threnodies for the ordinary country folk, Hardy makes the dead who have been denied a proper history by their so-called betters, protest from the grave:

'We are stript of rights; our shames lie undressed,
Our deeds in full anatomy are not shown,
Our words in morsels merely are expressed
On the scripted page, our motives blurred, unknown.'

Much of Hardy's work defends the dispossessed. But it has to do so from a height. Being what he was, he could not be what he had come from. Similarly John Clare. This is the dilemma of the great writer or artist who stays at home. Hardy's actual touching-the-soil poems are few and far between. One is 'The Farm-Woman's Winter':

I
If seasons all were summers,
And leaves would never fall,

And hopping casement-comers
 Were foodless not at all,
 And fragile folk might be here
 That white winds bid depart;
 Then one I used to see here
 Would warm my wasted heart!

II

One frail, who, bravely tilling
 Long hours in gripping gusts,
 Was mastered by their chilling,
 And now his ploughshare rusts.
 So savage winter catches
 The breath of limber things,
 And what I love he snatches,
 And what I love not, brings.

Hardy is unusual as a writer in that he lets characters from his novels have an extra life in his poems. There is 'Tess's Lament', and in 'The Pine Planters' we have Marty South, the heroine of *The Woodlanders*, having to fell trees alongside the lover who refuses to look at her. Their actions are mechanical:

We work here together
 In blast and breeze;
 He fills the earth in,
 I hold the trees.

He does not notice
 That what I do
 Keeps me from moving
 And chills me through.

He has seen one fairer
 I feel by his eye,
 Which skims me as though
 I were not by.

And since she passed here

He scarce has known
 But that the woodland
 Holds him alone.

I have worked here with him
 Since morning shine,
 He busy with his thoughts
 And I with mine....

But it was for Hardy the desolate fields of Flintcomb-Ash which represented the nadir of farm toil. It is where poor Tess ends up when she is reduced, as so many women were, to near-slavery. In 'We Field-Women' Hardy shows this place in varying degrees of weather:

How it rained
 When we worked at Flintcomb-Ash,
 And could not stand upon the hill
 Trimming swedes for the slicing-mill.
 The wet washed through us—plash, plash, plash:
 How it rained!

How it snowed
 When we crossed from Flintcomb-Ash
 To the Great Barn for drawing reed,
 Since we could nowise chop a swede.
 Flakes in each doorway and casement-sash:
 How it snowed!

How it shone
 When we went from Flintcomb-Ash
 To start at dairywork once more
 In the laughing meads, with cows three-score,
 And pails, and songs, and love—too rash:
 How it shone!

But of course it is in his magnificent set pieces of the farming year, such as the famous scene in chapter 22 of *Far from the Madding Crowd* in which shearing is given a sumptuous treatment unlike anything previously seen in literature, that Thomas Hardy reveals the closeness of his eye, if not his hand, to his local earth. Similarly, the description of the

patriarchal splendours about dairying in Tess where a Dorset farmer controls a world like that of Abraham. In such scenes Hardy challenges every previous concept of the 'simple task' and directs the reader's vision to a view of labour which holds within it those satisfactions which are usually found in poetry and religion. His story-telling is filled with meditation. One is made aware of his divided intelligence as he sees life as the shearers see it, and then as he himself sees it. Joseph Poorgrass sums up the whole business of farming with his, "Tis the gospel of the body, without which we perish, so to speak it.'

John Clare would have agreed. But his position was a complex one. When a man ploughs, it is with one foot in the furrow and one on the level. It makes a rough progress, up and down, up and down. He was the peasant; he was the supreme English poet of the countryman's experience. Eventually—one could say inevitably—the unevenness tripped him into Northampton General Lunatic Asylum where, far from insane most of the time, he wrote. With little else to do, the output was enormous—and uneven. This cache of sometimes earthbound, often soaring rural poetry lay mostly buried until the 1920s onwards, when writers such as Edmund Blunden, the Tibbles, Geoffrey Grigson, Geoffrey Summerfield and Eric Robinson brought it into the sunlight.

The progress of agriculture is a kind of Alps, all peaks and plunges. For so natural an activity, it is strangely precarious and easily ruinous. Clare and Hardy sang its heights and charted its depths. Clare lived through the trauma of Enclosure, cursing its evils, and then through the bitter years of Chartism. Hardy was just at the beginning of his career when a biblical spell of rain washed away all the brief farming prosperity of the 1850s and brought in the long years of depression. By the 1890s, when he renounced novel-writing for poetry, there began what they called 'the flight from the land' as the labourers fled from agricultural misery. At this moment another young writer, Henry Rider Haggard, who had made a name with exciting adventure stories about Africa and who in his thirties was now farming in Norfolk, tried to halt the exodus. All this just a century after the birth of Clare and just when Hardy had abandoned fiction.

Clare was in continuous flight from the land as workplace, but only to find his true working place in the little hidden copses and dells and woods where he could write unseen and undisturbed and especially unnoticed. His and Hardy's poetry differed because one touched and the other watched the soil. Each fully understood its majesty and its treachery. Clare's work is alternately a *Te Deum* and a *De Profundis* to the cultivated and uncultivated acres of his native Helpston, the place of endless work and endless dreams.

CHAPTER IX

'Not Verse Now, Only prose!'

'Not verse now, only prose!'—Robert Browning

A poet's prose has its own special resonance and is read with a special critical interest. We think of Keats's letters, Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*, Stevie Smith's and Philip Larkin's one-off novels, Rilke's *Note-Book of Malte Laurids Brigge* and T.S. Eliot's criticism. A few great writers—Thomas Hardy, D.H. Lawrence—possess an indivisibility where their poetry and prose are concerned.

John Clare's prose increasingly enthralls us. We know what to expect from the poetry but never when it comes to ordinary narration. The fact that the prose contains the same wrestlings of simplicity and complexity as the poems hardly helps, for here is an unfamiliar Clare artlessly putting down the facts of his existence and his particular kind of learning. It is all most compelling. What a clear head, what a strong hand. We are listening to him talking, rather than singing. It makes a tremendous difference in our concept of him. His prose 'works' may be fragmented but they are not slight, and one of them, the tragic *Journey Out of Essex*, is unforgettable. In this little 'road-book' Clare speaks for every homeless person. Just five days' tramp along England's main road, given his words, becomes every wanderer's tale. In it the poet is a bedraggled bird who escapes from one cage only to be trapped in the next. 'You'll be noticed', the Gipsy woman warns him near St Ives. She was if she but knew it stating his plight altogether. Without his prose we would never have got to the unadorned realities of his life. He provides them with Georgian candour and without any attempt at concealment or making a good case. Yet what was commonplace to him is rare to us, for this is what time does, turns the ordinary matters of one age into things of extraordinary interest for the next. We pore over Clare's scrappy autobiography finding every sentence a revelation not to be missed, when all he intended was the plainest placing of his cards on the table. 'This is who I am. Not much, as you will see.' But then he did possess a nice clear prose-hand.

Publishers even now are not best pleased when an author goes off on to what to them is a by-road. When John Clare's publishers Taylor and Hessey got wind of what sounded like to them of their new prodigy's intention to launch out upon a full literary career after the success of his first book, *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* in 1820, they were disturbed. And when they were sent a prose piece entitled *The Woodman* they felt bound to ask, 'Is it all your own work?' for it showed another John Clare. He replied, 'The Prose you speak of is mine entirely & was intended to be carried on in a series of Characteristic and Descriptive Pastorals in prose on rural life & manners ... if you think it

worth while going on with tell me so...' Taylor wrote to say that *The Woodman* was 'much more correct than your prose usually is'. It is also an apprentice piece but one which showed that Clare could go far in this direction. It is a snow-scene into which much botany and dialect has been packed, a display of his native words and those found in natural history books, and everything held together by frozen men and boys.

Three years after Taylor and Hessey had received this rather unwelcome proof that their now celebrated rustic poet could write prose they published a delightful book called *Flora Domestica, or the Portable Flower-garden* in which the author, Elizabeth Kent, quoted lavishly from Clare's work, saying that 'None have better understood the language of flowers than the simple-minded peasant-poet Clare, whose volumes are like a beautiful country, diversified with woods, meadows, heaths and flower-gardens ... the sight of a simple weed seems to him to be a source of delight...' Clare's response to Elizabeth Kent's gardening book quite stunned their mutual publisher. 'I have been so pleased with the plan of the book & am always so fond of talking about flowers that I have ventured impertinently to offer some notes & remarks...' There followed a long list of his beloved village plants put down in such a thrilling way that by September 1824 James Hessey had got him working on *A Natural History of Helpstone*. Margaret Grainger tells the whole story in her magisterial *The Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* (1983). Flare and suggestion, confidence in their authors and convincing them of their ability to carry out a commission are all part of a publisher's business. John Clare as a companion to Gilbert White was a positively inspired notion. That Taylor and Hessey remained uncertain as to its becoming a reality is proved by such dampening warnings to Clare that embarking upon prose 'may injure your Poetical Name'.

What they did not know, of course, were Clare's indigenous scientific qualifications for such a task, his wide reading, his accurate eye-to-the-ground, his sighting of birds and, above all, his perpetual interest in everything which grew, or ran or simply *was*. He was himself a wild creature and untameable in village terms, always half-released even when tied to field toil, never 'quite *with us*' even when gregarious at the inn, a man who remained partly trapped and yet free. Which is the fate of most writers and artists who never leave home. The awkwardness of their position is the stimulant for their creativity, Thomas Hardy being the greatest exemplar of this. Neither his publishers nor his readers had any true grasp of what made John Clare tick. Had they done so Helpston would now be alongside Selborne in the bookcase, each natural history the perfect—and necessary—complement to the other. Both the quantity and the quality of Clare's natural history prose make it almost unendurable to accept the bleak fact that his companion to White was never guided into existence. He himself came to hate the way in which James Hessey had set up the book as a series of letters from Clare to his publisher. The Reverend Gilbert White's masterpiece, which Clare loved, was fashioned from the correspondence of equals, forty-four letters to

Thomas Pennant and sixty-six letters to Daines Barrington. For Clare having to write similar letters to Hessey, a publisher, was not at all the same thing.

Saturday 11 Sept. 1824

Written an Essay to day 'on the sexual system of plants' and began one on 'the Fungus tribe and on Mildew Blight etc' intended for 'A Natural History of Helpstone' in a Series of Letters to Hessey who will publish it when finishd I did not think it woud cause me such trouble or I shoud not have began it.

(*Natural History*, p. 175)

At the same time, and as an antidote to the depression which work on this project caused him, Clare started to write his private Journal and this was 'not so easy as I first imagind'. Difficult or not, and ill as he was all that autumn, the prose of both suggests that they should not be seen as separate entities but as parts of the whole. Not that Hessey would have entertained such a plan. John Clare was not to be so nakedly himself but someone who could give the countryman's version of the countryside, its flowers and birds and insects. Six months later finds him pulling away from Hessey's idea of a 'Natural History of Helpstone' by calling his book *Biographies of Birds and Flowers*, a beautiful title. He had reason to know all along that neither Taylor nor Hessey were seriously committed to it. As Margaret Grainger says, 'They blew hot and cold on him. They praised; then came the chill wind of reproof, and Clare could never have known whether to open a letter of theirs in hope or apprehension. They were cautious men in areas that were not their own. Natural history was to them a strange world, and they had established Clare's reputation as a peasant *poet*'. But even this state was being shaken and undermined by Taylor as he cuts *The Shepherd's Calendar* telling Clare 'that there is twice as much more as he wants' and informing him that he and Hessey will soon be dissolving their partnership. Meanwhile, only some of the *Natural History Letters* reached the tepid Hessey. Others flooded into Clare's *Journal* and into notebooks and on to scraps of paper, all in all a marvellous outpouring of prose. No other rural historian has so completely 'joined' the scientific with the folk or popular understanding of nature. Clare is a kind of bridge giving access to two interpretations of the natural world, lovingly linking them.

Whether he would have so vigorously entered the then highly popular sphere of the Essay had not his publishers at first casually, and then regretfully, wondering what next they could get him to do, tossed towards him the notion that he could be a peasant White, is unlikely. The dozen or so Natural History Letters which he sent to Hessey, his uncomprehending Daines Barrington, must have shown Clare himself that, tough as the going often was, he was a good hand at prose. As for material, it was everywhere he looked, everywhere he listened, inside him from his past, pouring from his chronic reading, filling his

imagination, staring up at him from every Helpston fact. In prose he is the master of the English village inventory. His bird and orchid lists are fascinating. His character is revealed in constant small acts and observations:

Saturday 28 May 1825

Found the old Frog in my garden that has been there this four years I know it by a mark which it recieved from my spade 4 years ago I thought it woud dye of the wound so I turnd it up on a bed of flowers at the end of the garden which is thickly covered with ferns and blue bells and am glad to see it has recoverd—in Winter it gets into some straw in a corner of the garden and never ventures out till the beginning of May when it hides among the flowers and keeps its old bed never venturing further up the garden— (*Natural History*, p. 243)

Earlier that year he is discovering that birch bark, unwrapped from cut poles, takes Ink and makes an excellent substitute for paper. Margaret Grainger makes the daring suggestion that, in the great pre-Darwinian age of the non-professional naturalist, it was a pity that he and the fifth Earl Fitzwilliam, and not James Hesse, were not correspondents, 'this serious-minded, quiet, country-loving gentleman who observed with an attentiveness that reminds one of Clare himself.' Both men were unmannered and intimate in their nature notes. Both, in her phrase, seemed 'to take one personally by the hand' to what they saw or heard. Such prose was tremendously popular at the time. She lets James Fisher give John Clare his real due: 'He was the finest poet of Britain's minor naturalists and the finest naturalist of all Britain's major poets.' Prose reveals his unusual intellect. it is strong, eloquent and candid. Here is the natural writer as well as the naturalist.

CHAPTER X

Rider Haggard and the Disintegration of Clare's World

'Nowadays the novel is almost everything. If a matter is to be read of, it must be spiced and tricked out with romance. But, rightly or wrongly, I imagine that the generations to come will study our facts rather than our fiction.' So declared Henry Rider Haggard at the close of the nineteenth century as he exchanged the hat of a bestselling novelist for that of a worried Norfolk farmer. The prognostication would not prove accurate where he was concerned. *King Solomon's Mines*, *She* and a number of his tales bear both reading and examination to this day. Their narrative strength and brilliant imaginative atmosphere, like those of Stevenson and Ballantyne, have kept Haggard's fictions from being carried away on the usual tides. His Africa and his East Anglia were equally potent forces in his literary development, though in severely divided interests. Africa made him an Empire romance-writer of the first water in ordinary popular terms, but two small farms on the Suffolk-Norfolk border made him an agricultural historian not unworthy a place near Arthur Young, William Cobbett and Lord Ernle. Was Haggard himself divided, a part colonialist, part squire? An administrator of the Cape and a JP and churchwarden of his English village, a family man and a wanderer, a progressive abroad and a Tory at home, a man of action in Pretoria and a dreamer in West Dereham—was his a double life? Curiously not. His personality combining an earthy level-headedness with that uniquely Victorian adventurousness and fantasy was all of a confident piece. Which is why his two 'state of the land' books, *A Farmer's Year* and *Rural England*, are now recognized as key reading for anyone who wants to know how and why the countryside we see today has emerged. Perhaps more novelists should be set to producing reports on social change.

Haggard took as a blueprint for *A Farmer's Year* Thomas Tusser's *Hundredth Good Pointes of Husbandrie*, a practical guide to farming written by a professional musician in the year in which Elizabeth I came to the throne. Tusser wrote his famous advice at Cattiwade, Suffolk, where he was sowing and ploughing fields very close to those which would be worked by John Constable's family in the eighteenth century. It is the source of a great number of the rural proverbs, saws and platitudes which are still in use today. Tusser later farmed at West Dereham, Norfolk, which is why he attracted Haggard. Here was a kind of artist whose duty, like his own, it was to understand and explain man's primal toil, the growing and harvesting of crops, and the herding of animals. Except that, unlike Tusser's agricultural scene, Haggard's was one of stagnation, collapse and abandonment. The tragedy was what the politicians and newspapers of his time were calling 'the flight from the land'. When he wrote *Rural England*, he placed a text from the Book of Judges on the title-page—'The highways were unoccupied ... and inhabitants of the villages ceased.'

The epigraph on the title-page of *A Farmer's Year*, the bitter-sweet journal of what was happening on his own farms as the great agricultural depression descended upon them 'during the last year but one of an eventful and wondrous century' comes from Tom Tusser, the musician-farmer struggling along in the 1550s by the River Stour:

Who minds to quote
 Upon this note
 May easily find enough:
 What charge and pain,
 To little gain
 Doth follow toiling plough.

Haggard called *A Farmer's Year* 'His commonplace book for 1898' and illustrated it with maps, statistical tables and melancholy sepia pictures. He shows that he is a master of 'atmosphere', that here is no less powerful in its way than that which surrounds Ayesha and Umslopogaas. He was in his early forties when he wrote it and was taking stock of his future after having unsuccessfully contested the local parliamentary seat. His career so far had been extraordinary—thrilling even—combining as it did the Victorian virtues of action and the ability to describe it. At nineteen he had sailed to South Africa to be secretary to the Governor of Natal, Sir Henry Bulwer. Two years later he was on the staff of Sir Theophilus Shepstone and had himself raised the Union flag in Pretoria's main square. Revered by the Africans, detested by the Boers, Shepstone had annexed the Transvaal for Britain almost single handed—and without consulting the government. The resulting turmoil ended an extraordinary career. Shepstone's psychological approach to native Africa and his great adventures—he had himself crowned Cetewayo King of Zululand—entranced the young Haggard and fed his imagination. Although he was still only twenty-four when he returned to England for good, Africa and daring radicals like Shepstone continued to influence his vision and made him a very unusual member of Norfolk's farming and sporting gentry. Most curious of all was his ability not to allow his reputation as a popular romancer in any way to compromise that which he was soon to gain as the tough and realistic recorder of Britain's worst agricultural slump. Thus his *Farmer's Year*, a format frequently used by poets, diarists and country-calendarists, is a village book with a difference.

Haggard began farming in 1889, a time when many of those who could were getting out of the industry, and especially the farm-labourers. Throughout East Anglia 'Our American relations were bringing villages to poverty by swamping the markets'—i.e. newly-invented iron grainships, the oil tankers of their day, were flooding Europe with cheap corn from the prairies of the United States and Canada. And if this wasn't bad enough, a run of wet summers which culminated in 'the fearful year of 1879' had washed out what was left

of harvests and hope. For Haggard, not long married and also by now fast becoming one of England's most popular writers of adventure fiction, it was not just a question of truthfully documenting the collapse of farming, but of a sincere need to reawaken in country people their belief in nature, in the patterns of field-work and of craftsmanship, and most of all a belief in the superiority of village existence to that of the city. 'What kind places are these cities to live in, for the poor?' What kind of places in the late nineteenth century were Bedingham and Ditchingham for thirteen shillings-a-week farm labourers and near bankrupt farmers? *A Farmer's Year* provides answers that are both earthily practical and filled with Haggard's deep love for the land. A few months before he wrote it he had visited Egypt and had seen the paintings and reliefs on the royal tombs at Sakkara, and had thought how very like he was to 'the gentlemen-farmers of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties who, whilst yet alive, caused their future sepulchres to be adorned with representations of such scenes of daily life and husbandry as to them were most pleasant and familiar'. Egypt had had plagues, but they passed and the joy of the cornfields remained. So he makes his plea to the English countryman to stand firm, 'although how the crisis will end it is not possible for the wisest among us to guess today'. We now know that this crisis ended in the 1940s, when the nation's food requirements inaugurated the second agricultural revolution—and, subsequently, today's embarrassing food mountains.

In all Haggard farmed 365 acres, some two-thirds of which were near his house at Ditchingham, a big village of 1100 inhabitants, and a third in Bedingham, a village 5 miles distant. Some of the Ditchingham land was rented. These farms are immensely ancient and are mostly on 'loving' or heavy land which clings to boots and wheels. When such farms go down it can take years to drain and weed them and bring them back to good working order, and he records his struggles with the dereliction at Bedingham. Ditchingham, where the young Haggards lived in the Lodge, was a very different matter for the situation was one of the most beautiful in Norfolk, where the Bath Hills and the Waveney Valley spread towards Bungay and the grounds of the Lodge were bordered by the river. Close to the village were the extensive woodlands owned by Lord de Saumarez but whose shooting rights belonged to Haggard. The scene here is that of the successful Empire-builder come home to rest on his laurels—except that it happens to be a scene whose underlying difficulties are preoccupying a landowner novelist whose idealism and expert grasp of agricultural economy were tearing him apart, emotionally speaking. In time he would produce the kind of report which make governments act, although those of his own day scarcely raised a finger to help the farmer and his men. But now, as the scale of what was happening became clear, Haggard decided that a personal farming diary in the classic form, a book which everybody connected with the land would be warned and inspired by, was essential.

A Farmer's Year holds nothing back. The profit and loss of Ditchingham and Bedingham are given to the last halfpenny. So in another sense are those of Haggard's

personality as he swings over from being a typical conservative to a highly candid radical. Much of what he longed to happen has happened, a great deal of what he was sensibly proposing nearly a century ago still hasn't been done. The one thing in particular which the modern reader must be struck by is the gulf which stretches between a Victorian gentleman-farmer and his labourers. As magistrate, employer, church warden and workhouse guardian, Haggard is in total control of them and not less possessive of them than were those Nile farmers of their slaves whose seasonal tasks he saw carved around the doors of Sakkara. He admires their skills and strength, their stoicism and their character, but with all his imagination he cannot get into their situation, and his book is the better, if the more bitter, for his never attempting to do so. Suitably in the December chapter he describes a visit to Heckingham Workhouse and it sums up his absolute honesty.

What do these old fellows think about, I wonder, as they hobble to and fro round those measureless precincts of bald brick? The sweet-eyed children that they begot and bred up fifty years ago, perhaps, whose pet names they still remember, dead or lost to them for the most part; or the bright waving cornfields whence they scared birds when they were lads from whom death and trouble were yet a long way off. I dare say, too, that deeper problems worry them at times in some dim half-apprehended fashion; at least I thought so when the other day I sat behind two of them in a church near the workhouse. They could not read, and I doubt if they understood much of what was passing, but I observed consideration in their eyes. Of what? Of the terror and the marvel of existence, perhaps, and of that good God whereof the parson is talking in those long unmeaning words. God ! They know more of the devil and all his works; ill-paid labour, poverty, pain, and the infinite unrecorded tragedies of humble lives. God? They have never found Him. He must live beyond the workhouse wall—out there in the graveyard—in the waterlogged holes which very shortly....

In all Haggard employs fifteen men on his farm and gives meticulous descriptions of their many skills. Their dogged strength astounds him. In January he watches two of them bush-draining a huge expanse of clay land. It takes ten weeks and at the end 'such toilers betray not the least delight at the termination of their long labour' (*A Farmer's Year*). Similarly with dyke-drawing, the toughest of all the winter jobs. This is a book which reminds one that, the ploughing apart, most of Britain's landscape was fashioned by men with spades. Haggard's men work a twelve-hour day in summer and every daylight hour in winter, and without holidays. Minimal though their education is, it 'teaches them that there are places in the world besides their own Little Pedlington' and makes them aspiring and restless. More and more of them disappear, making for the army, the colonies, the Lowestoft fishing smacks,

anywhere preferable to a Norfolk farm. It grieves him. *A Farmer's Year* is his apology for agriculture as man's natural activity, the noblest of tasks, and he cites its improved conditions. Now and then, as in Africa, he joins in the labour, although this he finds separates him further from the workers than if he merely sat his horse and made notes. What ever he sees or feels or does is written down with total candour, and his journal is at once an important and authoritative compendium of farming practice, a private confessional, a history of turn of the century Norfolk and, in its way, an entertainment. The scene he paints is darker than he wants it to be and, for something which set out as an autobiographical rural calendar about the state of the land at a given date, balance sheets and all, there are highly emotional and intellectual tensions of an unexpected kind.

Sir Henry Rider Haggard's then radical exposure of agrarian decline in this and other books disturbed the profoundly conservative rural society to which he belonged, and, getting on for a hundred years later, it is still capable of upsetting us. But capable of delighting us too, for this is a rich picture of the old landscape and the 'old' people as they were before modern farming and other developments transformed both. It is unlikely to make anyone nostalgic but it will, like a tale by Thomas Hardy, remind us of the tensions, and of the idyll, which not so very long ago were interlocked, as it were, in the fields.

A Farmer's Year first appeared as a serial before it was published in book form in 1899. Its purpose was to hearten the yeomen of England during a time of utter hopelessness and to check the abandonment of the villages by their employees. Haggard pours into the narrative everything which would fascinate the farmer and his men: legends, local history, flowers, sport, the church, games, gossip, weather, prices, customs, country pleasures, hard-nosed profits and losses—nothing is left out. He said that 'it mirrors faithfully ... the decrepit and even dangerous state of farming and attendant industries in eastern England during the great agricultural crisis of the last decade of the nineteenth century', and it does.

CHAPTER XI

Edmund Blunden and John Clare

Address given in Long Melford Church on the centenary of Blunden's birth, 1996.

Poets have their own way of keeping in touch with one another, and it is always unexpected. At the outbreak of World War Two it was popularly expected that its poets would instantly reach out their hands to the poets of the Great War, as it was called, to Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Rupert Brooke—and Edmund Blunden. But instead, and to the mystification of many of their readers, they held out their hands to Hölderlin and Rilke, two German poets of whom the public knew little or nothing. Sidney Keyes, among the finest of the second war poets, who died in the Western Desert just before his twenty-first birthday, associated himself closely with Hölderlin and Rilke, and with John Clare, having been introduced to the latter by Edmund Blunden. Keyes was at Blunden's own college, Queen's, and there and later at Merton, where Blunden taught, an entire inter-war generation of English students would have been asked, 'Have you read John Clare?' Keyes read him on his birthday, July 13th 1941 and wrote him a 'Garland' which ends:

When London's talkers left you, still you'd say
 You were the poet, there had only ever been
 One poet—Shakespeare, Milton, Byron
 And mad John Clare, the single timeless poet.
 We have forgotten that. But sometimes I remember
 The time that I was Clare, and you unborn.

We are here today for myriad reasons which time has drawn together to remember Edmund Blunden's birth just a hundred years ago, and to not forget that he was the twenty-three year old who first shook the dust of forgetfulness from the bright poet who for so long lay incarcerated in Peterborough Museum, and to remind ourselves that it was the youthful Blunden who in a sense became our Clare after the Armistice, giving a voice to poor rural Suffolk when he and his wife lived near here at Stansfield.

I knew him slightly when I was young. He was then retired to the Mill House, Long Melford, given to him by Siegfried Sassoon. The mill ford from which this huge grand village takes its name laps its walls. Edmund was a small, quick, bird-like man, bookish, widely travelled yet deeply rooted in both Kent and Suffolk. I remember a long walk to Colchester Station with him and his quick gaze at the grim building inscribed 'North-East Essex Lunatic Asylum' as we climbed to the booking office, and his giving me a bundle of lecture notes in

his beautiful hand just as the train puffed in. This when I myself had just begun to write. Later, we would discover him at midday in the Bull at Long Melford and talk shop.

On John Clare's centenary in 1964 Blunden gave a lecture at the Aldeburgh Festival describing how 'this great writer' was 'revived in 1919' by himself and a fellow undergraduate Alan Porter, which was as loving an act in literature as can be found. In 1919 Edmund Blunden took up the Oxford Scholarship which he had been awarded in 1914, but had postponed because of the war. No sooner had he settled in than he and Alan Porter, a fellow freshman, decided that 'Clare was a neglected but entrancing poet, and before long we had almost signed in our blood a pact that we would not cease from mental strife, and so on, until we had built Clare's scattered poetry up again, the unknown with the known'. As Alan Porter was destined to be an English professor at Vassar, he might now be rightly thought of as the founder of Clare studies in the U.S.A., for it is hardly likely that such an enthusiast would not have led the Michigan girls to the poet, among them the recently arrived Edna St Vincent Millay.

Blunden's and Porter's first call was on aged Dr Druce the Oxford botanist, who had actually seen John Clare, 'a solitary looking at the sky', as he said. He lived in Crick Road and his letter of introduction unlocked the Peterborough cupboards for these eager young friends, who rushed around Helpston with no preparation and scarcely any money, finding the grave, the birthplace, the monument and, in the city, more poetry than could have ever been imagined. At Aldeburgh Blunden said that Clare had been neglected because the world never knew the half of him. But how could such a writer have remained so fragmented, so lost, for so long? Blunden had come to John Clare whilst still a boy via a now little remembered but excellent writer named Arthur Symonds. In 1908 at the age of twelve he came across Symonds's selection of Clare's work in the Oxford Library of Prose and Poetry, made at the time when Symonds himself was suffering from mental illness, thus bringing him near to Clare in a deeply personal sense. Symonds had known Verlaine and Mallarmé, and had anticipated Calvi with a delightful book called *Cities*. He too, like Blunden, lived in Kent, thus we enter the literary labyrinth in whose rich corridors writers cross paths, time and experiences.

Edmund Blunden took his Arthur Symonds selection of John Clare to the Western Front. It was the tradition of many soldiers to carry a pocket edition of their favourite book all through the war. Blunden tells in *Undertones of War*, published ten years after the armistice, how he lost his Clare. His troop had been sent to some huts in a cherry orchard to learn gas-drill. While this went on the officers sat around talking poetry. They were three kilometres from the line. The cherry orchard was filled with convolvulus, linnets, butterflies, even if the young soldiers were forced to run through the gas-filled huts with flannel masks over their heads. With Blunden was an officer friend named Xavier Kapp, later the famous cartoonist. It was he who stole his Clare. Blunden wrote:

I will stay in this farmhouse while the gas course lasts and to get the old peasant in the evenings to recite more LaFontaine to me in the Bethune dialect! and read— Bless me, Kapp has gone away with my John Clare! He has the book yet for all I know!’

In 1917 many previously reserved occupations, including farmworkers, were called up. The Third Ypres, or Passchendaele was due. Blunden ends his *Undertones of War* with ironic references to the labour corps digging the Haig Line and himself in tours of inspection, not only of his poor men but of ‘the willows and waters which are so silvery and unsubstantial’ that one could spend a lifetime painting them. He watched his countrymen and rejoiced that at that moment anyway ‘No destined anguish lifted its snaky head to poison a harmless young shepherd in a soldier’s coat.’

After Oxford Blunden rented a cottage near Clare, Suffolk. He too was a young man who gazed on the countryside with a clear eye. It is now 1922 and he has done much work on the rehabilitation of John Clare, bringing together the known and the unknown, and himself finding out who this astonishing writer really was as he continues to smooth out the manuscripts at Peterborough, touching his pages, getting the drift of his pencil. Siegfried Sassoon is about to arrive at Clare Station and Blunden goes to meet him. From Sassoon’s diary:

16 June 1922. I left here early on Monday morning, and reached Clare station about 12.30.... It was a sunshiny day, and there was little Blunden waiting for me in his shabby blue suit. He had just picked up a first edition of *Atalanta in Calydon* for a shilling in a little shop in Clare. And outside the station sat Mary B. in a smart blue cloak, in a tiny wagonette drawn by a small white pony. (A conveyance hired from a farmer and driven by his juvenile daughter.) Slowly we traversed the four miles to Stansfield, up and down little hills among acres of beans and wheat. Arrived at Belle Vue, a stone-faced slate-roofed box of a house by the roadside. And for three days B. and I talked about county cricket and the war and English poetry and East Anglia and our contemporaries ... And I read Clare and Bloomfield and Blunden. And the weather became chilly and it rained on Tuesday and Wednesday; and we drank port by a small fire after dinner. And B. hopped about the house in his bird-like way; and we both received a letter from ‘old Hardy’ by the same post. And we admired the old man’s calligraphy. And we bicycled to Sudbury and lost our road home and had to push the machines across three wheat-fields.

An anthology entitled *Poetry of the Year, or Pastorals from our Poets Illustrative of the Seasons*, with pictures by Birket Foster and David Cox, and published in 1867, just three years after Clare's death, placed him more or less where he would stay until Arthur Symonds and then Blunden rescued him. It contains four poems by him, all of them altered, one bowdlerised. By what can only be a strange coincidence, the collection is opened with those lines from Thomson's *Seasons* which Clare read as a child and which, he said, decided him to be a poet. Among the contributors are Chatterton, Crabbe, Shakespeare, Herrick, Gray, Burns, Keats and Bloomfield, so good company. Even among these Clare's voice is strong and distinctive, and clearly saying far more than what is on a pretty page.

In 1931 Blunden published for the first time *Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself*. Blunden was now teaching at Oxford after a spell in Tokyo and had discovered enough about John Clare to spread his name wherever he went. What thrilled him was his accuracy and his power to sing the almost unchanged realities and imaginings of the village, for in Blunden's time whether in Kent or Suffolk, 'Helpston' was just up the road. Nor was it far from Acton, my own Suffolk birthplace three miles from Long Melford, where he came to rest. The farms were in a kind of turmoil during the Twenties and Thirties as the great agricultural depression, briefly lifted by subsidies during the first world war, came down on the fields like the proverbial wet blanket. I glimpsed it from a tall old thatched house lit by oil-lamps and candles, and watered by a pond and a well. Plough-horses jingled and snorted in the yard and when the crops demanded it, hoards of itinerant workers appeared to do pea-picking and similar tasks, many of the young men wearing bits of khaki. The wild flowers were glorious. By the end of summer the Stour was so filled with them in places that we could not see the river at all. Only the road fields were cared for. What lay behind them was our boyhood paradise, all the riches of poverty and neglect. Blunden's love of Clare had a lot to do with his gratitude for 'coming through', as the war survivors described it, and with his conviction that although Clare 'could not but report freshly, in his own pleasant vocabulary, upon the life and environment of a village labourer in the days of George IV' what he said remained both excitingly and sadly valid in the post-armistice England of George V. In his poem *East Anglia* Blunden catches at the hardness which keeps rural life ticking, no matter what:

In a frosty sunset
 So fiery red with cold
 The footballers' onset
 Rings out glad and bold;
 Then boys from dally tether
 With famous dogs at heel
 In starlight meet—together

And to farther hedges steel;
Where the rats are pattering
In and out the stacks,
Owls with hatred-chattering
Swoop at the terriers' backs
And, frost forgot, the chase grows hot
Till a rat's a foolish prize,
But the cornered weasel stands his ground,
Shrieks at the dogs and boys set round,
Shrieks as he knows they stand around,
And hard as winter dies.

When Blunden was finding Clare there was no sign of the second agricultural revolution to come. Only a second war would hustle it into existence. He saw the bankrupt farmers selling up, holding furious protests on Newmarket heath, refusing any longer to pay tithes to the Church of England, and amidst all the clamour the particular quiet of poverty. He was in fact seeing the slow-vanishing of 'Helpston' though neither he nor any of us knew it. What he witnessed was hedgers and ditchers digging the trenches and horsemen from the farms ploughing their way through the mud in Flanders, and the white war memorials going up in every village, and what he discovered was an inventory of such people for too long locked away at Peterborough which sang their praises and told who and what they really were.

CHAPTER XII

Presidential Fragments

Ten years of the John Clare Society's existence, ten days in Helpston, each of them sunny and distinctive. Before this Helpston was a place in poetry. The actual coming to it for just one day each year has proved to be a truly poetic experience in itself and one which from the start has gone far beyond those feelings which most of us share when we visit the 'country' of some great writer or painter. In 1979, just before Mr. Blade the Rector of Helpston, Edward Storey and others succeeded in founding the Society, I had what with hindsight might be described as a hint of what was to come, as well as an opportunity to turn this hint into a kind of considered statement. It was the year when the Swedish Royal Society of Arts and Sciences celebrated its bicentenary with a series of lectures on the subject of 'The Feeling for Nature and the Landscape of Man'. Mine was the inaugural lecture and I called it 'An Inherited Perspective: Landscape and the Indigenous Eye'. It was thus in Gothenberg on a wild October morning that I first talked of Helpston, and indeed first wrote about John Clare.

A few months ago I happened to glance up from my book as the train was rushing towards Lincoln to see, momentarily yet with sharp definition, first the platform name and then the niggard features of one of the most essential landscapes in English literature, John Clare's Helpston. I had not realised that the train would pass through it, or that one could. It was all over in seconds, that glimpse of the confined prospect of a poet, though not before I had been reminded that he had thrived in it for only as long as he had been contained by those flat village boundaries. When they shifted him out of his parish, and only three miles distance, and for his own good, of course, he disintegrated, his intelligence for a while fading like the scenes which had nourished it. Of all our English poets, none had more need to be exactly *placed* than John Clare. His essential requirements of landscape were minimal and frugal, like those of certain plants which do best in a narrow pot of unchanged soil.

I observed this tiny, yet hugely sufficient, world of his dip by under scudding clouds. A church smudge—and the poet's grave an indefinable fraction of it—some darkening hedges, including those planted after an Enclosure Act had re-mapped the millennial fields and wastes, thus guaranteeing Clare's disorientation, a few low pitched modern dwellings, and this was all. It was scarcely more impressive in the poet's lifetime and a contemporary clergyman, gazing at it, said that 'its unbroken tracts strained and tortured the sight'. But not Clare's sight, needless to add. This it fed and extended, its modest images proving to be, when properly seen, a full

revelation of the human spirit and of nature. Clare liked to follow the view past the 'lands', which he disliked because of the way they over-taxed the strength of his slight physique when he laboured on them, to where the cultivation dropped away into a meeting with heath and fen. From then onwards the alluvial soil swept unbroken to the sea. It was this further landscape of the limestone heath, he said, which 'made my being'. And it was in such a comparatively featureless country that genius found all that it required for its complete expression.

To be a native once meant to be a born thrall. Clare's enthrallment by Helpston shows the local eye at its purest, at its most disciplined and at its most informed. By his ability to see the furthest when, to most of us, the view is limited, he developed a range of perception which outstripped all the village commentary of his day. Not that he had any choice. Clare did not choose Helpston as his 'subject'; Helpston (or nineteenth-century rural England) had in some mysterious but necessary way chosen him to be its voice. In speaking of themselves, poets speak for their own people; in speaking of his village, Clare spoke for a world.

I quote from this address because it was suggested that I might help to celebrate our first decade as a Society by publishing some of my presidential addresses in the Journal. But what do I find? A lot of notes or leads (and few of these in decent order) and a lot of space through which I talked. If these addresses possessed any single determination it was to keep Clare the ultimately triumphant poet, and not Clare the tragic figure, uppermost. All literary societies have to beware that the biographical interest never overshadows a writer's work, or that the fascination of literary criticism itself should not do so. Thus—I hope—my message as President has been a consistent one of 'read John Clare'. Like most of our members, my first reading would almost certainly have been 'Little Trotty Wagtail'. Where I went from there I can't remember. It could have been to Edmund Blunden's *Sketches in the Life of John Clare by Himself* (1931) in which I encountered for the first time his spare and riveting prose. Blunden was a neighbour and when after the First World War he began the process of Clare's rehabilitation his address was 'Belle Vue, Stansfield, Clare, Suffolk'. Those who worked the fields around his cottage during that terrible hard-up time did so in conditions almost as harsh as those in Clare's lifetime.

I remember Blunden coming to read Clare at our local literary society and his giving me all his notes, and his certainty of John Clare's greatness. It was Blunden who was the first person I had ever met who had been to Helpston. It could have been him who opened Clare's world to Sidney Keyes, that good poet of the Second World War, killed in the Western Desert when he was twenty, and the writer of my favourite poem on Clare. It is called 'A Garland for John Clare' and he wrote it on Clare's birthday, 1941. When I read it as a boy I could never have imagined that I would spend ten such birthdays—or near

birthdays—at Helpston itself. I once read it as part of the presidential address because it is such an important recognition-point on my own path to Clare. It is about what the young Keyes would give to him and would ask of him, and in which the madness of Hitler's war is all part of what sent Clare mad.

Whether the cold eye and the failing hand
 Of these defrauded years...
 Whether the two-way heart, the laughter
 At little things would please you, John; the waiting
 For louder nightingales, for the first flash and thunder
 Of our awakening would frighten you—
 I wonder sometimes, wishing for your company

This summer; watching time's contempt
 For such as you and I, the daily progress
 Of couch-grass on a wall, avid as death.
 But you had courage. Facing the open fields
 Of immortality, you drove your coulter
 Strongly and sang, not marking how the soil
 Closed its cut grin behind you...

A perennial question when Clare is mentioned is, 'Where did he get it from?' His own parents were among the first to ask it, and almost everybody since. Tennyson asked it in connection with Keats—'He had a touch, and yet he was a livery stable keeper's son. I don't know where he got it from, unless from Heaven!' Where did Tennyson get it from? Not from Trinity College, Cambridge. We may smile but it was the implication that Clare possessed what his kind shouldn't have which helped to make him ill. In his little autobiography he hazards, as any writer might do, 'where he got it from'. From his kind teacher at Glinton, from 'my reading of books', from 'the fine Hebrew poem of Job', from a tale called *Zig-Zag*, from five lines by Thomson, from the accident of his Scottish blood, from views of Northamptonshire which neither the locals nor the tourists would ever be able to see with their own eyes. In short, from a little education and his own limitless observation. A few months after Clare's death a student copied some of his poetry into his diary. The student was Gerard Manley Hopkins. This is the way poetry travels. In this way Clare has never been neglected or lost or in need of discovery, and a tracing of his influence from Hopkins to Ted Hughes would spring some surprises. Yet for the full picture of him and the magnitude of his achievement we shall for ever be indebted to the work of a group of

today's scholars whose skill is beginning to reveal both Clare and his countryside with ever fresh insights.

Our Society could claim to be Britain's most environment-conscious literary group. If, as Clare confessed, he kicked the poetry out of the clods, we now recognise as earlier generations could never have done the wonders which make up a lump of soil. There were times when he wished that earth had remained simply earth as the farm labourers saw it. Asked at the Epping asylum which he liked best, 'literature or your former vocation?' he replied, 'I like hard work best. I was happy then. Literature has destroyed my head and brought me here.' And yet, as we know from the remarkable output of the long asylum years, it would be the writer who would ultimately prevail. Just as Clare had the power to articulate the life of the fields and common lands with a reality unknown to any previous English poet, so did he articulate the common disaster of so many country people of his day who through penury, age or mental illness were packed into workhouse and madhouse. And yet in his work one is in constant encounter with joy, something he knew more about than almost anything else. It is his puzzle. The other thing he knows all about is the bliss of the hidden life. In days of despair he would write of the shipwreck of all he was but regularly throughout his life there would always be this sometimes snug, sometimes exquisite satisfaction of possessing either a love or an existence of which he could never be robbed. It shows in some of the poems which Seamus Heaney and Ted Hughes have included in their happily indulgent anthology *The Rattle Bag*, in his song 'I hid my love', for instance which, although a trail of farewells and absences, is also a triumphant account of the privacy of the heart. It was hard for anyone not to be under constant observation in what was essentially a gregarious late-Georgian village and one of the delights of reading Clare is to accompany him to his hides.

One of the most tantalising 'what might have beens' of Clare's life, and one I have often referred to over the years, was the inconclusive natural history of his countryside which Hessey the publisher suggested, directing him to Gilbert White's now celebrated *Natural History and Antiquities of Selborne*. It was a percipient suggestion, far more so than Hessey could have realised at the time. But it was accompanied with such warnings as 'prose may injure your Poetical Name', and at a time when Clare's confidence was being undermined by editors, none of whom were capable of recognising his unique indigenous scientific qualifications, as it were, for describing his native heath, his wide reading, his accurate eye, above all his passion for everything which grew, flew, ran or simply was. He himself was a partly wild creature when seen in the terms of village society and was half-trapped and half-released by being a once acclaimed poet. Although he had lovers, friends and neighbours, his easiest and fullest communication was with Nature. When a naturalist went to see Thomas Hardy, then at the peak of his fame, he was disconcerted to discover that 'he did not know the flowers of the field'. Nor did, or do, most country people. But Clare

knew them both botanically and emotionally. He shared their habitat. He too grew there. Transplanted, he lost his necessary light. Margaret Grainger in *her Natural History Prose Writings of John Clare* rightly says that had Hessey and all the rest of them shown a bit more faith in him, Helpston might now possess a similar reputation to that of Selborne. Here is a sample of what might have been from one of the Natural History Letters which Clare wrote to James Hessey. It is about the Landrail and the Quail, birds which were endowed with wonder for the would-be Northamptonshire Gilbert White.

W[h]ere is the school boy that has not heard that mysterious noise which comes with the spring in the grass & green corn I have followd it for hours & all to no purpose it seemd like a spirit that mockd my folly in running after it... About two years ago while I was walking in a neighbours homstead we heard one of these landrails in his wheat we hunted down the land & accidentily as it were we stirted it up it seemd to flye very awkward & its long legs hung down as if they were broken it was just at dewfall in the evening it flew towards the street instead of the field & popt into a chamber window that happend to be open when a cat seizd & killd it it was somthing like the quail but smaller & very slender with no tail scarcly & rather long legs it was of a brown color they lay like the quail & partridge upon the ground in the corn & grass they make no nest but scrat a hole in the ground & lay a great number of eggs My mother found a landrails nest once while weeding wheat with seventeen eggs & they were not sat on they were short eggs made in the form of the partridges but somthing smaller staid with large spots of a dark color not much unlike the color of the plovers I imagine the young run with 'the shells on their heads'... The quail is almost as much of a mystery in the summer lands cape & comes with the green corn like the [landrail] tho it is seen more often & is more easily urgd to take wing it makes an odd noise in the grass as if it said 'wet my foot wet my foot' which Weeders & Haymakers hearken to as a prophecy of rain...
(*Natural History*, pp. 49-50)

Clare began to keep his *A Natural History of Helpstone* (sub-titled *Biographys of Birds and Flowers*) in September 1824. Only a month later he became ill and upset. Young villagers were sick and dying. The old rural life was marked by sudden spates of pain and mortality through tuberculosis or fevers. Clare draws his own tombstone in his Journal and reveals how depressed he is by finding 'three fellows at the end of Royce wood who I found were laying out the plan for an "Iron rail way"' (*Natural History*, p.245). And yet, as Margaret Grainger says, these fears and miseries are written down at the same time as a mass of poems, a reading list which reveals hours of pleasure and the records of many fascinating excursions in the company of the sympathetic Billings brothers, the learned Edmund Artis

and Joseph Henderson, the head gardener who seemed to know everything, especially how to cheer up depressed genius. Clare knows that his response to many of the things which get him down is irrational—and even anti-village—and he acknowledges this with charm and honesty. Here he is in the same mood as Gerard Manley Hopkins when he saw what had been done to the poplars at Binsey.

—my two favourite Elm trees at the back of the hut are condemned to dye it shocks me to relate it but tis true the savage who owns them thinks they have done their best & now he wants to make use of the benefits he can get from selling them... I have been several mornings to bid them farewell—had I £100 to spare I would buy their reprieves—but they must dye—yet this mourning over trees is all foolishness they feel no pains they are but wood cut up or not... was People all to feel & think as I do the world could not be carried on—a green woud not be ploughd a tree or bush woud not be cut for firing or furniture & every thing they found when boys would remain in that state until they dyd—this is my indisposition & you will laugh at it— (*Letters*, p. 161)

I shall end this piecing together of presidential fragments with what I can recall of the talk I gave on Clare's recurring theme of boyhood, chiefly his own but also village boyhood generally. The persistence of this theme was part-deliberate, part-unconscious. He had not only to record it, but to constantly re-imagine it. Later he would use it to combat what he called 'this sad non-identity.' The first thing which any writer has to discover is who he is. Clare had regularly to remind himself who he was. This is not only the fate of madmen, or of poets like Coleridge, who would never do after thirty what he had done during his twenties, but of us all to some degree. John Clare was not a visionary, he was a remembrancer. He remembers his father's pride: 'Boy, who could have thought, when we were threshing together some years back, thou wouldst thus be noticed, and be enabled to make us all thus happy?' He remembers the darkening of the original scene, how 'All that map of boyhood was overcast' by Enclosure, how his first and only complete love was 'thwarted', he remembers himself aged ten asking, 'Who owns the land?' He remembers what few poets remember, the exuberance of children. His work rings with the voices of noisy labouring young people. *The Shepherd's Calendar* is full of singing, shouting, whistling and general hubbub, of calling and cries. There is the happy dirty driving boy, the bawling herdboy, the fanciful shepherd's boy, the talkative boy at the shearing, the loud bird-scaring boy, all of them, and countless girls besides, briefly, enchantingly wild—until

Reason like a winter's day
Nipt childhood's visions all away.
Those truths are fled and left behind

A real world & a doubting mind.

John Clare, of course did not have his childhood visions nipt away, hence his achievement, hence his suffering, hence his dilemma. In full possession of them until the end of his life, he could only make use of them. His constant refrain, 'when I was a boy', is always a reminder that he is going to say something which is far from childish. 'When I was a boy I used to be very curious to watch the nightingale.' The word 'watch' instead of 'hear' or 'listen to' is a revelation. 'When I was a boy there was a little spring of beautiful soft water which was never dry. It used to dribble its way through the grass in a little ripple of its own making, no bigger than a grip or cart-rut. And in this little springhead there used to be hundreds of little fish called a minnow. We used to go on Sunday in harvest to leck (bail) it out with a dish and string the fish on rushes...thinking ourselves great fishers.' His recollection of this fecund scene, when placed alongside his memory of the same area after it had been drastically rationalised by the new agricultural policy sounds all too familiar to late twentieth-century ears.

Inclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain
It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill
And hung the moles for traitors—though the brook is running still
It runs a naked stream cold and chill
(from 'Remembrances')

But Clare's real indictment of what the Georgian planners did to Helpston is about the destruction of its hides. Not only he the poet, but every village child needed a mesh of heaths, muddles, ancient stretches of no-man's land, personal footpaths, dells and warrens. This was where from time immemorial boys grew up. It was Clare's university, where he read, where he thought, where he watched, and most of all where he could disappear. When he was small it was exciting to have a barn all to himself on Sundays. His first writings, he tells us, were made in barn-dust.

The home ground of many writers casts a familiar spell. The home ground of John Clare which I, and most members of the Society, see for a day a year, is more the actual seed-ground of a remarkable literature than perhaps any other corner of England. We, of course, will have to take care not to become more absorbed in the place, time and conditions which created it than in the poetry itself.

CHAPTER XIII

Kindred Spirits

History has its wilful side. It refuses to stay within its dates. Parts of it trickle on into decades—even centuries—where, to the historian, it doesn't belong. Somebody says something and a connection is made by which history, whether social, or literary, or political, stops being History with a capital H and a discipline, and becomes something which is still happening. Then writers, novelists, poets, dramatists confuse us by not playing the history game according to the historians' rules. Thomas Hardy's novels rushed out one after another in roughly twenty years between the 1870s and 1890s yet without being 'historical' they were a reflection of early nineteenth-century Dorset—his mother's countryside. My Suffolk grandparents were born in 1860, when Clare was still living, and before Hardy had written a word. My grandmother lived to watch our first television set, when she was nearly a hundred years old. 'I have to ask one thing', she said, 'can *they* see *us*?' A good question.

I had never heard of Clare as a boy. 'Our' poet was Robert Bloomfield. I used to bike to Honington to look at the cottage in which he was born. It was very like the house in which I was born, which was thatched and beamed, with a big garden, a horse-pond, pig-sties, outside lavatory—two holes so that mother could sit with a child—fruit trees and a well. It doesn't exist now. Three executive bungalows stand on the site. One can trace the horse-pond where the stripy lawn dips. By the side of the house is the long beech avenue from the lane to the vicarage up which my parents were driven in the borrowed vicarage carriage in 1920 after their wedding. They were 23, and my father had been at Gallipoli and was now returning to a broken-down agriculture. Not far away were two young writers I would one day meet, Edmund Blunden and Adrian Bell.

But it was the long-dead but still strangely influential writer Robert Bloomfield who was one of the haunters of my childhood. He was born in 1766 and so belonged to a previous generation to Clare. His father was a village tailor and his mother a village schoolteacher. For all that, he was barely literate when he joined his two elder brothers in London to be apprenticed as a shoemaker. The three brothers and four other men all lived and worked in one room in great squalor. Bloomfield was short and slight, but not with Clare's 'smallness', being shaped by malnutrition and toil. Being blunted in fact. Bloomfield taught himself English by reading the speeches of Burke, Fox and North in the London newspapers. Eventually a Scot named Kay joined the crowded shoemakers and brought with him a copy of *Paradise Lost* and—need I tell you—Thomson's *The Seasons*. So the little Suffolk poet was away. He sent some verses called 'The Milkmaid' to the *London Magazine* and they were accepted. He then began to compose *The Farmer's Boy*, managing to hold as many as 50 to 100 lines in his head before he could move from his last and write them down.

Bloomfield wrote the whole of this long poem whilst working alongside the hammering, sewing, chattering men. Old people still knew fragments of it by heart when I was a child. It went to bookseller after bookseller (i.e. publisher) for years and eventually ended up with a Mr. Capel Lofft from the poet's own part of Suffolk. In 1798 Capel Lofft wrote a preface to *The Farmer's Boy*, had it illustrated and got it published. It sold 26,000 copies. This bestseller—alas—haunted those who were later to publish John Clare as a second Bloomfield, notwithstanding Clare's greatness.

Clare himself honoured Bloomfield as writers from shared circumstances frequently honour each other. He would also have known about the tragedy which overtook Bloomfield. There is a saying in East Anglia, 'He rose too high—so he fell'. Bloomfield's career bleakly acknowledges this logic. After the fame of *The Farmer's Boy* the Duke of Grafton got him a position as an under-sealer at the Seals Office but the poet wasn't able to keep it. The Duke then gave him a shilling a day. Bloomfield was married now, the children coming along. He wrote further books, all of which failed and the slide into penury was fast. He then became bankrupt. There was a fashion for Aeolian harps, brought about by the Grecian revival, and Bloomfield tried to make a living by creating these. One of his harps is in Moyses's Hall, Bury St. Edmunds. Also his writing table. The Aeolian harp was set up in gardens so that the wind could pass through the strings and produce musical sounds. The sound was like that of the wind in telephone wires. Nobody bought Bloomfield's harps, and nobody seemed to notice the irony of a poet having to give up language and try to support himself—by wind.

Bloomfield's biographer in the *DNB* says that he 'lacked independence and manliness, and would have gone mad had he lived any longer', a cruel verdict and an unfair one. He died in great poverty and distress in 1823, a short while after John Clare had reached the pinnacle of his brief popularity with *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* written by 'a Northamptonshire Peasant'. At the last Bloomfield was so wretchedly ill and poor that he tried to touch the heart of his readers by begging them to buy his book *Wild Flowers* because the royalties would provide a financial crutch for his crippled only son. In this world of sick and starving—and socially humiliated—writers we are in a 'history' that no amount of late twentieth-century scholarship can quite succeed in bringing home to us. John Clare, of course, would have exactly understood. He called Robert Bloomfield a 'sweet unassuming minstrel' and wrote:

The tide of fashion is a stream too strong
 For pastoral brooks that gently flow and sing
 But nature is their source and earth and sky
 Their annual offering to her current bring (*Middle Poems*, IV, p. 182-3)

The trouble for certain poets and artists at the turn of the nineteenth century was that the English rural scene was commonplace. The new middle classes which sprang up after the Napoleonic Wars did not want Constable's pictures of farms in their new houses. Haywains cooled their axles in every ford and pond. When Constable died in 1837 he left a house full of unsold work. His two uncles—his father's brothers—lived in my present village and ground the corn from the fields which once belonged to my farmhouse, and are buried in the churchyard. He called them 'the Wormingford folk'. Their handsome tombs, half hidden in honeysuckle, proclaim their status—'gent'. I was struck when reading Mrs Constable's letters to her son John, then attempting to establish himself as a painter in London, by the near-absence of reference to the village people of East Bergholt, who only get a mention if they have an accident or might be prosecuted. Constable's placid (his favourite word) territory was threatened by rural unrest. He strove to show the grandeur and the reality of scenery, but was detached from the men and women whose toil produced the sumptuousness and order which he loved. His farmhouses take precedence over the labourers. The superb painting called 'The Leaping Horse', originally 'The Jumping Horse', however, was a horror picture for a society which, above anything else, was terrified of what to them looked like an uncontrolled horse. But the great artist was here showing his accurate eye for a workaday and yet very beautiful world. Every half-mile or so along the towpaths of the River Stour there was a wicket fence to the water's edge to stop sheep and cattle straying. When the huge Suffolk Punches which drew the Constables' barges encountered such a fence, the bargee would give a low whistle and the largest horses in England—leapt!

John Clare, unlike Robert Bloomfield, made few concessions to 'taste' when it came to describing the actualities of village life, and was famously the despair of patrons and publishers alike. But Bloomfield is unusually impressive in his dealing with illness. He is the poet of rural sickness without ever quite realising it. He catches in his verse the tell-tale cough, the crippled walk, the flight of strength. One of his most interesting poems in this respect is *Good Tidings; or News from the Farm*. What are these good tidings? They are that Dr. Jenner has discovered a vaccine in 'the harmless cow'. 'We shall look back upon smallpox as the scourge of days gone by'.

Bloomfield's death in 1823 upset Clare. There had been certain curious cross-references before Clare's publishers sought to present him as a genius from the same mould. For example, at the brief height of Bloomfield's fame an illustrated edition of his poetry was issued containing views not only of Norfolk and Suffolk, but of *Northamptonshire*. This was *Views...Illustrative of the Works of Robert Bloomfield*, and the artists were John Greig and James Storer. This in 1806, when Clare was only thirteen.

It would have been fascinating to know if Clare ever saw a Constable during his 1820s visits to London. John Clare's artist was Edward Rippingille, a wild blade five years his

junior. During the London visits the pair of them went on the town, drinking and looking for girls. Rippingille had a reckless reputation in his adopted city Bristol. Clare was very fond of him:

He is a rattling sort of odd fellow with a desire to be thought one and often affects to be so for the sake of singularity and likes to treat his nearest friends with neglect and carlessness on purpose as it were to have an opportunity of complaining about it

he is a man of great genius as a painter and what is better he has not been puffed into notice like the thousands of farthing rush lights (like my self perhaps) in all professions that have glimmered their day and are dead I spent many pleasant hours with him in London his greatest relish is pun[n]ing over a bottle of ale for he is a strong dealer in puns... we once spent a whole night at Offleys the Burton ale house and sat till morning (*By Himself*, pp. 137-8)

The critics were ruthless. Rippingille, they said, ‘allowed his garden, the musing of an owl, his guitar, his building and firing at a mark with a pistols, to encroach too much on his afternoons—which he calls days’.

John Clare was all for a young man who called his afternoons days, and who played a guitar while listening to owls. Shades of Edward Lear. Clare also maintained ‘that no artist had such a true English conception of real pastoral life and *reality* of English manners as Rippingille’. He was the son of a King’s Lynn farmer and Clare remembered once seeing a shop full of his paintings in Wisbech in 1809.

Rippingille knew the Eltons of Clevedon Court, near Bristol and I am indebted to the late Lady Elton for the concluding part of this lecture. For it is about her husband’s ancestor, Sir Charles Abraham Elton’s percipient understanding of John Clare, and about a strange poem he wrote to him after seeing him on one of his unhealthy London forays—during the zenith days. Lady Elton wrote to me on 13th August 1993:

The Clare-Elton friendship is rather complicated. They seem to have met in London c. 1822 at the monthly Dinner for contributors to the *London Magazine*, and with Rippingille the Bristol painter, went to Astley’s Circus where they saw ‘morts of tumbling’, to Deaville the phrenologist to have their heads cast in plaster, and to boxing matches. This is all described (I think) in a letter not in Tibble, but in the British Library. When Clare was back in Helpston c. 1824 Charles Elton sent him a copy of his *Epistle To John Clare*, urged him to come to Bristol, and promised that Rippingille would paint his portrait. Family tradition has it that Charles Elton sent Clare five guineas, although he was relatively poor.

He had married in 1804 against his father's wishes, the Rev. Sir Abraham being a Hellfire and Brimstone Evangelical who refused to help him. By 1825 he had eleven extant children, including two sets of identical twins. The two eldest boys were drowned in Weston in 1819, hence the poem 'Boyhood: A Monody' published in 1820. It so impressed John Scott that Charles Elton was invited to become a contributor to the *London Magazine*, taken over by Taylor and Hessey when Scott was killed in a duel. The money was very useful as Charles Elton was living on half-pay as an officer in the Somerset Militia. Henry Hallam, his brother-in-law, also helped to support one family. (Henry's son Arthur's early death inspired Tennyson's *In Memoriam*. Tennyson was at work on his poem whilst living near John Clare at Epping. The New Year bells of 'Ring out, wild bells' are those of Waltham Abbey.)

By 1825 Charles Elton felt that he could afford Thomas Barker's fee of £100 to have his wife and children painted in Bath, a fetching series of portraits which we still have. The next year Ripplingille painted 'The Travellers' Breakfast', ostensibly in a Bristol Inn, and a jokey picture, as Wordsworth, Dorothy Wordsworth and Coleridge are in it, though they had long since left Bristol. Lamb, Southey, Cottle, Charles Elton, four of his daughters, his wife and two infant sons, Ripplingille himself, *and*, I am convinced, a lithe rustic figure as Clare...

This is how Charles Elton's poem-invitation to visit him in Somerset opens. It was first published in the *London Magazine* in August 1824, and subsequently in *Boyhood and Other Poems and Translations* in 1835.

Epistle to John Clare

So loth, friend John! to quit the town?
 'Twas in the dales thou won'st renown;
 I would not, John! for half-a-crown
 Have left thee there;
 Taking my lonely journey down
 To rural air.

Needless and perhaps sad to say, Clare never took up Charles Elton's generous invitation. He was but one of many subsequent poets who had a longing to give something to Clare—to really give him friendship, comfort, happiness, understanding—anything within their power. Sir Charles Elton was a bookish Whig and not a bit like the Duke who gave Robert Bloomfield a shilling a day. Elton's longing to give was more in line with the youthful

Sidney Keyes's *A Garland for John Clare* which he wrote on John Clare's birthday, 1941. It is a poem which continues to move me as much as anything I have read about John Clare.

A Garland for John Clare

I

Whether the cold eye and the failing hand of these defrauded years...
 Whether the two-way heart, the laughter
 At little things would please you, John; the waiting
 For louder nightingales, for the first flash and thunder
 Of our awakening would frighten you—
 I wonder sometimes, wishing for your company
 This summer; watching time's contempt
 For such as you and I, the daily progress
 Of couch-grass on a wall, avid as death.
 But you had courage. Facing the open fields
 Of immortality, you drove your coulter
 Strongly and sang, not marking how the soil
 Closed its cut grin behind you, nor in front
 The jealousy of stones and a low sky.
 Perhaps, then, you'll accept my awkward homage—
 Even this backyard garland I have made.

II

I'd give you wild flowers for decking
 Your memory, those few I know:
 Far-sighted catseye that so soon turns blind
 And pallid after picking; the elder's curdled flowers,
 That wastrel witch-tree; the toadflax crouching
 Under a wall; and even the unpersistent
 Windflowers that wilt to rags within an hour...
 These for a token. But I'd give you other
 More private presents, as those evenings
 When under lime-trees of an earlier summer
 We'd sing at nine o'clock, small wineglasses
 Set out and glittering; and perhaps my friend
 Would play on a pipe, competing with the crickets—
 My lady Greensleeves, fickle as fine weather

Or the lighter-boy who loved a merchant's girl.
 Then we would talk, or perhaps silently
 Watch the night coming.
 Those evenings were yours, John, more than mine.
 And I would give you books you never had;
 The valley of the Loire under its pinewoods;
 My friend Tom Staveley; the carved stone bridge
 At Yalding; and perhaps a girl's small face
 And hanging hair that are important also.
 I'd even give you part in my shared fear:
 This personal responsibility
 For a whole world's disease that is our nightmare—
 You who were never trusted nor obeyed
 In anything, and so went mad and died.
 We have too much of what you lacked
 Lastly, I'd ask a favour of you, John:
 The secret of your singing, of the high
 Persons and lovely voices we have lost.
 You knew them all. Even despised and digging
 Your scant asylum garden, they were with you.
 When London's talkers left you, still you'd say
 You were the poet, there had only ever been
 One poet—Shakespeare, Milton, Byron
 And mad John Clare, the single timeless poet.
 We have forgotten that. But sometimes I remember
 The time that I was Clare, and you unborn.

III

Whether you'd fear the shrillness of my voice,
 The hedgehog-skin of nerves, the blind desire
 For power and safety, that was all my doubt.
 It was unjust. Accept, then, my poor scraps
 Of proper life, my waste growth of achievement.
 Even the cold eye and the failing hand
 May be acceptable to one long dead.

CHAPTER XIV

Common Pleasures

There is something which meant as much to Clare as it does to us—pleasure. His alter-ego Byron, under whose name Clare had written his own ‘Childe Harold’, was an authority on this subject and liked to remind his readers that ‘there is no sterner moralist than pleasure’. John Clare knew early on that for pleasure to be truly pleasurable it had to be taken seriously. One had to know what was meant by it and how to pursue it. Not to know was yet one more sign of being a ‘clown’. For him clowns were not wise fools, God-struck outsiders or even entertainers, they were men who existed without vision and wonder, and who could never sing ‘the world is very beautiful and full of joy to me’. He once explained the difference between those pleasures which are the reward of intelligence and taste, and those pleasures which should be as ordinary a part of our human experience as breathing. He was himself an easy pleasure-taking young man and he despised those who were blind to the flowers beneath their feet.

Pleasures are of two kinds—One arrives from cultivation of the mind & is enjoyed only by the few—& this is the most lasting & least liable to change—the more common pleasures are found by the many like beautiful weeds in a wilderness they are of natural growth & though very beautiful to the eye are only annuals—these may be called the pleasures of the passions & belong only to the different stages of our existence... The pleasures of youth are enjoyed in youth only. After that the very recollection of their sweetness sours and embitters the infirmities of manhood.

(Selected Poems and Prose, p. 100)

‘The infirmities of manhood’—not, you will notice, the infirmities of old age. The infirmities of manhood—what poet has ever said this? Clare is full of surprises. Wordsworth famously said that after childhood it is downhill all the way, but Clare does not mean this. He means what every countryman means when he speaks of the pleasures of youth. Where his first type of pleasure is concerned the poet is candidly elitist. Those pleasures which come from the cultivation of the mind, and which do not go sour on one when the time comes for ‘the infirmities of manhood,’ are indeed the pleasures which are enjoyed by ‘the few’. But yet he is telling us, ‘have both’. He himself would during quite appalling ‘infirmities of manhood’ mull over them without sourness and make them sustain him. Reading and a self-trained eye for everything which lay around him—including the lives of his neighbours—were what would guarantee him lasting pleasures. He made it possible for himself to retrace every pleasurable step in order to view what he called his ‘annuals’, and then to find them

undistorted by what would later happen to him. Time and time again he would return to those pure pleasures which were once his, and his alone. Even when, like Job, he had lost all, even then the pleasures of language, botany, women, drink, birds (especially), talk with old friends, of writing, are all somehow perfectly recovered by that extraordinary retrieval system of his. Of course, his all too terrible infirmities of manhood would often invade these recovered joys but they never succeeded in vanquishing them quite. Sometimes he is in the past as though it were the present, and what occurred decades ago, the pleasure especially, becomes what is happening now. It is uncanny. I have called Clare a remembrancer and not a visionary, but what he does is to somehow remember or recall the past with a descriptive power which is usually applied to current events. In such instances he is often seen sick at heart at such an undimmed recollection of an ancient happiness. His late work, frequently elegiac, remains spun through with an earlier vitality. The copious output of the asylum years contains much that is merely recidivist, a falling back into subjects and images which did him well long ago, yet every now and then—and the blazing back into freshness is frequent—he is as he was, the young poet in Helpston, free in the village fields.

One of John Clare's 'common pleasures' which contributed to his 'cultivated' pleasures was bad weather. Right up until the 1930s a rainy day could wash out a labourer's skimpy wages, and was dreaded. But Clare's eyes lit up when the first drops fell. I can remember the Suffolk farmworkers pulling beet with the rain pouring from the sacks which they wore over their heads like monk's cowls, their muddy legs soaked to the thighs, as they slogged through a storm rather than loose precious shillings. And Thomas Hardy used such a scene to illustrate the nadir of Tess's misfortune:

How it rained

When we worked at Flintcomb-Ash,

And could not stand upon the hill

Trimming swedes for the slicing-mill.

The wet washed through us—plash, plash, plash:

How it rained!

And how John Clare welcomed it!

—how I used to mark with joy?

The south grow black and blacker to the eye

Till the rain came and pessed me to the skin

[pessed = soaked]

No matter anxious happiness was bye

With her refreshing pictures through the rain

Careless of bowring bush and sheltering tree

I homeward hied to feed on books again

(*Labours Leisure, Selected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 104-5)

And how Patty his wife would have wrung her hands to see the damp little figure running up the garden path—to his books! When Clare thinks of those who, unlike Patty, can but do not read in youth for the rainy days ahead, he is angry. Such ‘clowns’ could and should do more for themselves. A clown for him was the wilfully ignorant man and no jester. Educated William Cowper called the ignorant peasant ‘the child of nature, without guile’. Clare, familiar with rural louts, hasn’t a good word for them. Instead of pitying such for their meagre opportunities to improve themselves, he is furious with them for not feeding their brains and imagination, as he had done, with the riches which ‘poor’ Helpston spread before every one of its inhabitants. Book-learning apart, a whole world of reachable delights lay just beyond their doorsteps. He makes an inventory of it to prove it. When he lists the natural assets of his native village it is not in order to join forces with those writers who, since classical times, have presented an agricultural idyll. Such he mocked and deplored, whilst often captivated by their beautiful words. He is realistic about what it was like to labour and to bring up a big family in rural slum—to be Hodge, the most unenviable person outside a book. Much of his poetry is less to please those who are intrigued to have Hodge himself writing it, than to shake the ordinary countryman out of his torpor. ‘Look at these things. They are part of you—they are part of us!’ Clare is telling Helpston—telling every rural parish. And he makes long lists of flowers and creatures. ‘These are our common pleasures. By observing them now, some less common pleasures will still be yours in “infirm manhood”.’

A common question with Clare is why is so much of his work an inventory? Why did he feel compelled to list what everyone in Helpston, or in every other English village at that time, possessed? Was it possible that the reading public itself should not know most of these items? These crafts and blooms and birds and ‘characters’, these singing boys and girls and their recreations, this weather? Certainly there existed that part of society who found such things too low to notice. But in England where masses of people of all classes were, in spite of the new industrial cities, essentially countrymen and women, Clare’s work would have contained what was still most familiar to them. Yet it contains warnings. The poetry reading public would, like Helpston’s non-reading clowns, have nothing to support itself with when it inevitably enters ‘the infirmity of manhood’ if it does not in youth cultivate its mind. There is something of the sad music of the final chapter of *Ecclesiastes* in Clare’s reproving philosophy. Maybe he heard it in Helpston church. (Where did he sit, I wonder.) ‘Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.’ We know that he was not regularly there because, like ‘the shepherds and the herding swains’ he kept his ‘sabbath on the

plains'. Sunday was his reading day, his lying low in the tall grass day, his listing pleasures day. In 'A Sunday with Shepherds and Herdboys' he lends them his eyes and ears.

These necessarily stranded lads are any village's natural anarchists, and never clowns. Without method, their very isolation cultivates within themselves something which will, in due season, afford a progression from what the poet calls 'those pleasures of youth which are enjoyed in youth only'. In 'The Shepherds Hut' Clare tells of his debt to these unusual men, and of the music he inherited from them.

Those long old songs—their sweetness haunts me still
 Nor did they perish for my lack of praise
 But old disciples of the pasture sward
 Rude chronicles of ancient minstrelsy
 The shepherds vanished all and disregard
 Left their old music like a vagrant bee
 For summers breeze to murmur o'er and die
 And in these ancient spots mind ear and eye
 Turn listeners—till the very wind prolongs
 The theme as wishing in its depths of joy
 To recollect the music of old songs
 And meet the hut that blessed me when a boy

In 'The Eternity of Nature' Clare yet again despairs that so many of his neighbours never make that initial effort which, eventually, will open the door to higher things. Instead, he finds them grinning at people such as himself who find something to admire in weeds—bindweed, goosegrass—neighbours who go about Helpston blindly due to some sloth in their personality, some grim decision never to rise out of their degradation via the loveliness of the natural world. His poem 'Shadows of Taste' says that there is taste for all. 'Minds spring as various as the leaves of trees to follow taste'. And yet he sees the very children developing 'clownish hearts'. Who will teach them? Who will show them glory growing in a ditch? He will. It will be his vocation. So much of his work is not about how to tell the reading public how villagers live, but how to tell his own Helpston folk how to grow. His inventory of pleasures is for them. He hates them for their preferred ignorance:

The heedless mind may laugh, the clown may stare
 They own no soul to look for pleasure there
 Their grosser feelings in a coarser dress
 Mock at the wisdom which they can't possess (from 'Shadows of Taste')

They had made his life a misery so that, as a teenager, there had been:

A title that I dare not claim

And hid it like a private shame (from 'The Progress of Ryhme', ll. 275-6)

But poetry will out, it is its prerogative. And especially when one is young and so many lines are at their best. And when there was so much to tell. A missionary passion runs through John Clare's verse, a Baptist cry of 'Open your eyes!' Do not be a clown-child, a clown-youth. Just think of having, in old age, to confess, 'I had no pleasure in them' these ordinary wonderful things. The poet counted his pleasures and in so doing revealed himself in a remarkable way. Later, most tragically, the memories upon which such pleasures were founded would now and then collapse, and then where was he?

O I never thought that joys would run away from boys

Or that boys should change their minds and foresake mid-summer joys

But alack I never dreamed that the world had other toys

To petrify first feelings like the fable into stone

Till I found the pleasure past and a winter come at last

Then the fields were sudden bare and the sky got overcast

And boyhoods pleasing haunts like a blossom in the blast

Was shrivelled to a withered weed and trampled down and done

Till vanished was the morning stream and set the summer sun

And winter fought her battle strife and won (from 'Remembrances')

John Clare (1793-1864) holds a unique position in our literary culture as the greatest poet of English rural life, and a figure to whom other writers and poets are strongly drawn. Ronald Blythe's love of Clare began when a friend introduced him to Sidney Keyes's 1941 verse-tribute to Clare, and blossomed when he was invited to be the President of the newly-formed John Clare Society in 1982. His many talks and presidential addresses on Clare are gathered together for the first time here. Written over the last three decades, they offer a unique contribution to the study of Clare and his tradition, examining the qualities that have drawn writers and readers to Clare, and considering Clare's place in the changing rural world, a world about which Ronald Blythe has himself often written with distinction.

Ronald Blythe is the President of the John Clare Society, and one of our most eminent rural writers. His famous account of a Suffolk village, *Akenfield*, has recently been re-issued by Penguin as a Twentieth Century Classic.

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