

JOHN CLARE
Voice of Freedom

R.S. ATTACK



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‘The means of reviving a language lie in the heart of the poet and upon his lips and between his fingers. The poet is the mediator between the creative power and the people. He is the wire that transmits the news of the world of spirit to the world of research ...’¹

KAHILIL GIBRAN

Introduction

THERE WAS no better contemporary than John Clare (1793-1864) to give the English a first-class and first-hand overview of their time and its momentous social and economic changes. These changes mostly adversely affected the mass of society consisting of those who lived and worked in the rural communities. According to one of his many biographers, David Powell, Clare ‘was an astute chronicler of provincial England at the dawn of the industrial revolution’. The industrial and agricultural revolutions both came about as a result of land enclosures and the gradual introduction of new labour-saving machines and devices. In agriculture and in the factories, these changes had the effect of causing a decline in the need for men’s labour at a time when population growth was accelerating.

1 Kahlil Gibran, *Spiritual Sayings*, p.48.

JOHN CLARE: VOICE OF FREEDOM

John Clare's qualifications for this surveillance job were in the first instance a very adequate primary education in the vestry of his local church where he learnt to read and write. With these skills Clare became one of the best educated people for many miles around and possibly in the country. Having become well acquainted with all aspects of popular culture, including the oral tradition of popular songs and stories and ballads, he was the first documenter of such English folk material as village customs and pastimes, ballad singers and morris dancers. He has left us in his poetry, most notably *The Parish*, a vivid record of the rustic characters of his neighbourhood and the effects upon them of the social changes brought by the local Enclosure Act in 1809, at which point Clare was just sixteen. *The Parish* has been compared to Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Robert Burns (1759-1796) and John Clare were both found at the plough by their muse, and Clare at practically every other job in agriculture. Who dares to suggest that mud on the boots interferes with the job of the poet except to give him less time in which to write. Mud was an element well known to men and women of all classes in those days and Clare, once asked 'how he had contrived to write his pretty poetry', replied that he had 'kicked it out of the clods'.¹

Clare was widely read in natural history and was also

1 An anecdote of Dr Nesbitt to F. Martin, Clare's early biographer, quoted in R.K.R. Thornton, *John Clare*, Everyman's Library (Dent), 1997, p.xii.

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a keen botanist who gleaned his highly specialised knowledge from ‘patient fieldwork’.¹ This immersion in the natural world was to make him one of England’s foremost nature poets. He wrote as he felt – as part of his particular natural environment and not as an external observer. He was averse to cruel sports such as badger-baiting (see the extract from his poem ‘Badger’ on page 75) and the collecting of insect specimens, a practice which he termed ‘the fashionable folly to gibbet butterflies & strangle beetles’.²

Clare lost his first love and muse, Mary Joyce, at the age of fifteen when he felt that her father did not consider him a suitable match for his daughter. This event affected him deeply and his poems on the subject are heart-stirring and heart-breaking. Patty ‘Martha’ Turner, whom he married in 1820, at the same time as the publication of his first volume of verse, *Poems Descriptive*, loved and cared for him faithfully and was in fact the real love of his life.

His friends were such as the Turnill brothers, the sons of the Mayor of Stamford; Octavius Gilchrist, who had returned from Magdalen College, Oxford on the death of his father; Lord Radstock, whom Clare considered ‘one of his best’ friends; and Mrs Emmerson³ who had been

1 David Powell, *The Life and Times of John Clare*, Northamptonshire County Council Libraries and Information Service, p.13.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Mrs Emmerson was the wife of Mr Thomas Emmerson and they lived at 20 Stratford Place in London.

introduced to him by Lord Radstock, together with Lord Milton and Lord and Lady Fitzwilliam, who were his well-meaning patrons. Mrs Marsh, the Bishop of Peterborough's wife, was also a good friend. He visited London four times, the first in 1820 to see his publisher, John Taylor (who also published Keats), for the publication of *Poems Descriptive*. Whilst there he met others of the literati: artists and writers such as William Hazlitt, the literary critic, and Edward Rippingille, who also became a good friend. He met William Hilton who painted the portrait on the front of this book and which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery.

As says David Powell, John Clare stands as a 'self-educated genius'. It was this self-education that grew organically out of his own nature and unique situation and also produced his highly individual grammar and spelling. Certainly key poets such as John Clare by definition fashion their own language, as did Chaucer and Shakespeare. They arise at a time in history when their own particular voice seems to need to be heard. Language is always evolving in everyday use as people speak: accents change, different styles of expression arise and words come to mean something quite opposite to their original meaning. At any time the same word may mean one thing in one context and something else in another. In fact, Clare's peculiar self-directed education produced his highly original and individual style of expression. He stood alone, and still does, as a self-made man who

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emerged naturally from his background with his own particular message for mankind.

‘Those who make private property of the gift of God pretend in vain to be innocent, for in thus retaining the subsistence of the poor they are the murderers of those who die every day for want of it.’¹

ST. GREGORY THE GREAT (Pope 590-604)

Reflections

JOHN CLARE’S message for us today is a strong reminder of our complete dependence on land, without which we could not exist. His poetry points us to the root cause of our economic problems, and expresses horror at the maltreatment of people and the environment.

The dispossessed

Along with Shakespeare, Goldsmith and Shelley, Clare wrote some very acerbic and pertinent poetry in protest at the social upheavals caused by the Enclosure Movement, which came to a head at the turn of the 18th to the 19th centuries. He stood in his time and place as an important firsthand witness of the momentous social changes which were to affect the people of England, and

¹ Quoted in Roy Douglas, ‘Single Tax 1896’, in *Land, People and Politics: A History of the Land Question in the UK 1878-1952*, Allison & Busby, 1976, p.11.