

**POEMS BY
JOHN CLARE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649674084

Poems by John Clare by John Clare & Arthur Symons

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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EDITED WITH AN INTRODUCTION

By ARTHUR SYMONS

**LONDON
HENRY FROWDE**

1908

INTRODUCTION

I

WE are told in the introduction to a volume of poems by John Clare, published in 1820, 'They are the genuine productions of a young peasant, a day-labourer in husbandry, who has had no advantages of education beyond others of his class; and though poets in this country have seldom been fortunate men, yet he is, perhaps, the least favoured by circumstances, and the most destitute of friends, of any that ever existed.' If the writer of the introduction had been able to look to the end of the career on whose outset he commented, he would have omitted the 'perhaps'. The son of a pauper farm-labourer, John Clare wrote his earlier poems in the intervals of hard manual labour in the fields, and his later poems in lucid intervals in a madhouse, to which ill health, over-work, and drink had brought him. In a poem written before he was seventeen he had asked that he might

Find one hope true—to die at home at last,
and his last words, when he died in the madhouse, were, 'I want to go home.' In another early poem he had prayed, seeing a tree in autumn, that, when his time came, the trunk might die with the leaves. Even so reasonable a prayer was not answered.

In Clare's early work, which is more definitely the work of the peasant than perhaps any other peasant poetry, there is more reality than poetry.

I found the poems in the fields,
And only wrote them down,

as he says with truth, and it was with an acute sense of the precise thing he was saying that Lamb complimented him in 1822 on the 'quantity' of his observation. It is difficult to know how much of these early poems were tinkered for publication by the too fastidious publisher Mr. Taylor, and what is most smooth and traditional in them is certainly not what is best. The ballads and love-songs have very little value, and there is often a helplessness in the language, which passes from the over-familiar to the over-elevated. Later on he would not have called the glow-worm 'tasteful illumination of the night', nor required so large a glossary of provincialisms. As it is, when he is not trying to write like Burns, or in any way not quite natural to him, he gives us, in a personal and unusual manner, a sense of the earth and living things, of the life of the fields and farmyards, with a Dutch closeness, showing us himself,

Toiling in the naked fields,
Where no bush a shelter yields,

in his hard poverty, and with his sensitiveness to weather, not only as it helps or hinders his labour. You see him looking up from it, looking and

listening, and noting down everything he has observed, sometimes with this homely detail :

Now buzzing, with unwelcome din,
The heedless beetle bangs
Against the cow-boy's dinner-tin
That o'er his shoulder hangs.

No one before him had given such a sense of the village, for Bloomfield does not count, not being really a poet ; and no one has done it so well again until a greater poet, Barnes, brought more poetry with him. Clare's poetry begins by having something clogging in it ; substance, and poetical substance, is there, but the poetry has hardly worked its way out to freedom.

That it should have got so far on the way there is one of the most astonishing things in literature. These poems, in which there is so much that is direct and novel, were scribbled on scraps of paper in the intervals of a life which had never had what is called a single 'advantage'. John Clare was born, says his biographer Martin, in 'a narrow wretched hut, more like a prison than a human dwelling ; and the hut stood in a dark, gloomy plain, covered with stagnant pools of water, and overhung by mists during the greater part of the year.' This hut was in the little village of Helpston, which lies between Stamford and Peterborough, and Clare was born there, prematurely, and one of twins, on July 13, 1793. The father was dependent through ill health on parish relief, and the chief food of the family was

potatoes and water-gruel. At seven years of age Clare was sent to look after sheep and geese on the heath, and at twelve worked in the fields, though with hardly strength enough for the lightest labour. When he was a very small child he had set out one day to walk as far as the sky, that he might touch it, and when he was older he fancied that there were ghosts ready to attack him in the swamps, and as he was seen reading books among his cattle, and talking to himself, people thought him something of a lunatic. His head had been filled with old songs from the time he was seven, by an old woman who kept the cows near where he kept the sheep, and he had learned to read and write at night-classes after his work was over, and had tried in vain to learn algebra, as a kind of magic speech. He fell in love with Mary Joyce, but her father, when he found it out, would not let the 'beggar-boy' see her any more. She was never wholly out of his mind, and came back finally into it long afterwards, when he was mad, and seemed more actual than his living wife.

He was thirteen when the sight of Thomson's 'Seasons' showed him that he was a poet. He read it twice through under the wall of the park, and scribbled down on a piece of paper the lines which were afterwards to come out as 'The Morning Walk'. From that time he wrote verses on scraps of paper, which he would stuff in a hole in the wall, and his mother would use for lighting the fire. He

worked for some time among the gardeners in Burghley Park, and was taken by them on their drunken carouses, and would sometimes lie all night in the open air in a drunken sleep. Then he ran away, and at last went back to his home, where he returned to farm work. He showed some of his verses to a foolish person who asked him if he had learned grammar. The endeavour to learn grammar hindered him for some time from writing any more verses, and then he enlisted in the makeshift army that was to repel Bonaparte when he attacked England, and soon came back helplessly with a *Paradise Lost* and part of *The Tempest*. He again fell in love, and as that came to nothing, joined the Gypsies, who taught him to play the fiddle, but he was not with them long. Then he found work at a lime-kiln, where he had hard work, but enough leisure to write half a dozen songs in the course of a day. It was at this time, in 1817, that he met Martha Turner, the 'Patty' of some of his poems, whom he married, after many hesitations and differences, in 1820, a month before the birth of a child.

Between the meeting with 'Patty' and his marriage Clare had come to almost literal beggary, and had put down his name, like his father, as a pauper claiming relief from the parish. He had spent a guinea in printing a hundred copies of a prospectus, which he called 'Proposals for publishing by Subscription a Collection of Original Trifles on

Miscellaneous Subjects, Religious and Moral, in Verse, by John Clare of Helpston'. Only seven subscribers could be found, and it seemed as if the poems would never be printed, when by good luck they fell into the hands of a Stamford bookseller called Drury, who, after many delays, and against the advice of a Rev. Mr. Twopenny, of the parish, sent them up to his relative, Mr. Taylor, of the firm of Taylor and Hessey, Keats' publishers, who saw their value, announced them in the first number of their new *London Magazine*, and on January 16, 1820, published 'Poems descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery, by John Clare, a Northamptonshire Peasant', with an introduction, written by Mr. Taylor, which was almost an appeal for charity. The success was immediate: praise in the *Quarterly*, which had just attacked Keats, praise in all the reviews; Madame Vestris recites some of the poems at Covent Garden, and Rossini sets one of them to music. Clare is taken to London and has a wild week of dinner parties and theatres. In his own neighbourhood lords have thrown guineas into his lap and asked him to dinner, but in the servants' hall; here he dines by their side, dressed in a smock-frock covered by a borrowed overcoat, and makes good and helpful friends in Lord Radstock and the kind, flighty Mrs. Emmerson; and goes back to his home, to be ceaselessly called out of the fields where he is labouring by a succession of idle interviewers, not yet deadly and professional. Subscriptions are