Review of Simon Kövesi and Scott McEathron, eds., New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community

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New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community. Edited by Simon Kövesi and Scott McEathron. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xii+244. This fine collection of essays exemplifies, as the editors note in their introduction, the “striking variety” of Clare’s writings and the “interpretive capaciousness” of this fertile moment in Clare scholarship (10, 9). Ranging widely from Clare’s engagement with eighteenth-century verse to his reception in the years following his death, the contributors shed new light on some of his most characteristic forms and themes and on his complex place in the literary and political cultures of his day.

Fiona Stafford kicks off the volume with a terrific piece about Clare’s approach to color. Stafford demonstrates how Clare participates in contemporaneous debates about the picturesque, the relation between painting and drawing, and the representation of rural scenes. For Stafford, Clare’s colors convey moods, convince us of his habitual observation, convey both the passage of time and the wholeness of fully realized moments, and endow scenes with movement and depth. “Again and again,” Stafford writes, “Clare’s poetry teases us with its vivid sense of objective physical reality and simultaneous emphasis on the personal nature of perception, memory and interpretation” (20).

The interplay between the objective and the subjective in Clare’s writings about the natural world also interests Adam Rounce, Robert Heyes, and Emma Mason. According to Rounce, Clare “follows eighteenth-century poetic landscapes in outline, but makes them seem more familiar, domestic, intimate and therefore empathetic in their details” by conveying his own “associations, values and feelings” (42, 44). Heyes reconstructs the circumstances surrounding Clare’s natural history prose writings, which...
involve both careful observation and literary ambitions. Mason elaborates on Sarah Houghton-Walker’s *John Clare’s Religion* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009) by linking Clare’s environmental politics to a nondenominational yet “specifically religious form of mindfulness” that fosters “a lived politics of religious ecology constitutive of care, interconnectedness and inclusivity” (98). If Mason’s idiom carries an early twenty-first-century ring, John Burnside’s essay explicitly draws Clare’s writing into our present moment by posing the question, “What can a contemporary poet learn from a predecessor who lived and worked before it was publicly pronounced that poetry makes nothing happen?” (82).

Politics are also important for Sarah M. Zimmerman and Sam Ward in their worthy contributions to the volume. Both place Clare within the political atmosphere of the 1820s, Zimmerman in relation to how it shaped his ideas about privacy and Ward in relation to how the Queen Caroline controversy created an immediate context for the interpretation of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (1820). Ward’s carefully argued essay perfectly negotiates the antiradical and anti-aristocratic valences of Clare’s early poems, both for Clare himself and for his first readers, especially his patron Admiral Lord Radstock and his publisher John Taylor. Ward explains why some passages in Clare’s first book seemed to Lord Radstock to be “radical slang” (189), a watchword of conservative reaction. “Clare’s most anti-aristocratic seeming verse [was] viewed as contiguous with the wider radical discourse centred around Caroline,” Ward concludes, “because of the implicit challenge his writing posed to contemporary definitions of legitimate plebeian discourse and not because he was in any direct sense an active proponent of radical reform” (203). For her part, Zimmerman identifies a “conspiratorial poetics” in Clare’s poems about birds’ nests, domestic life, and solitude, a poetics that “plots to protect . . . homes from predators” and to defend the independent life of song (57).

For Zimmerman, Clare’s handling of the theme of privacy is also shaped by his experience of an intrusive, fickle culture of celebrity. That literary culture of the early nineteenth century is the subject of the three remaining essays, all of them excellent. Simon Kövesi excavates the eagerness of Clare’s readers and critics to forecast his demise from poverty and neglect. From the very beginning, Kövesi argues, Clare was placed in a lineage that looked back to Thomas Chatterton and Robert Burns and forward to tragedy and death. According to Kövesi, Clare was himself aware of this master story, sometimes employing it and sometimes resisting it.

One element of this narrative was the trope of the “fatally doomed poor poet [as] a nationally-defining marker of how England treats its poets, and its poor” (162). This is also a theme in Scott McEathron’s fascinating essay about Clare’s first biographer, Frederick Martin. In all his work, from his *Life of John Clare* (1865) and his novel *Alec Drummond* (1869) to his fraught
apprenticeship with Thomas Carlyle and tortured dealings with publishers, Martin’s “grand theme is the conflict between the individual personality and the institutional apparatus” (129). According to McEathron, The Life of John Clare “voic[es] Martin’s own half-conscious confusion about the relative worth of individual artistic merit and professional literary competency—about the value of spontaneity and instinctual ‘genius’ relative to that of hard work and pragmatism” (126).

Richard Cronin’s superb contribution explores “Clare’s role within the literary economy” of the London Magazine (225). In an utterly convincing dialectical argument, Cronin asserts that Clare was at once an antidote to and a mirror image of the magazine’s prevailing Cockneyism. As a figure for authentic rural subjectivity, language, and life ways, he counterbalanced the idiom and customs of the self-made, fluent, urban personhood of the magazine’s writers and readers. At the same time, as Cronin writes, “Cockney poets and peasant poets are close kin, both cultivating an impure language that allowed them to mediate between the magazine’s readers and kinds of experience with which those readers were unfamiliar” (222). In the pages of the London Magazine, thus, Clare is a figure for an almost-lost authenticity and for modern self-alienation, wielding both a truthful, rooted language resisting “the mass-produced language” of the city and an invented discourse that partook equally of spoken speech and printed verse (212).

This is an excellent collection. The best of these essays are groundbreaking and important not only for Clare scholarship but also for the study of nineteenth-century literature.

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