

Kovesi, S

An Uncatalogued Review of *Poems Descriptive, Dublin Inquisitor*, January 1821

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# The John Clare Society Journal

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# Contents

CLARE, JOHN ATKIN, AND <i>The Parish</i> Scott McEathron	5
POEM: FOR THE HOUSE SPARROW, IN DECLINE Paul Farley	25
JOHN CLARE, WILLIAM WORDSWORTH, AND THE (UN)FRAMING OF NATURE Scott Hess	27
ON THE PORTRAIT OF JOHN CLARE BY HENRY BEHNES Tom Bates	45
'SHADOWS OF TASTE': JOHN CLARE'S TASTEFUL NATURAL HISTORY Sarah Weiger	59
AN UNCATALOGUED REVIEW OF <i>Poems Descriptive</i> , <i>Dublin Inquisitor</i> , JANUARY 1821. Simon Kövesi	73
REVIEWS	81
Paul Chirico, <i>John Clare and the Imagination of the Reader</i> (Valerie Pedlar)	
John Lord, ed., <i>Peter DeWint 1784-1849: 'For the common observer of life and nature'</i> (Bob Heyes)	
John Goodridge and John Lucas, eds, <i>Robert Bloomfield: Selected Poems</i> . Revised and enlarged edition. (Bob Heyes)	
CONTRIBUTORS	87
ABBREVIATIONS	88

# An Uncatalogued Review of *Poems Descriptive* *Dublin Inquisitor*, January 1821

*Simon Kövesi*

The anonymous review that follows seems to be unknown to Clare scholarship. Incongruously sandwiched between reviews of the novels *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Charles Maturin and *Gwelygordd* by Charles Lucas, this largely favourable response to Clare's *Poems Descriptive* appeared in the first edition of the short-lived *Dublin Inquisitor*, in January 1821. If it is true that the review has been unseen by Clare scholars, the *Dublin Inquisitor* has been equally overlooked by bibliographers of Irish magazines and periodicals.<sup>1</sup> The review has been brought to light by the remarkable resource housed online at Google Book Search <books.google.com>. Here are stored electronic facsimiles of the collections of some of the world's greatest libraries. As a result, original editions of all manner of texts are more widely accessible than ever before: the resource now includes searchable facsimiles of all four of Clare's lifetime selections for example. The *Dublin Inquisitor* review is an indicator of what can be found when obscure printed books are made available through new technologies.

The text below maintains the spelling, italicisation, punctuation, and, as much as possible, the setting of the original.<sup>2</sup> A few explanatory endnotes have been added.

*“Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery,” by John Clare, a  
Northamptonshire Peasant.*

London, Taylor and Hessey, 1820

The interest of this little volume is enhanced by the circumstances attending its publication; and our readers cannot sufficiently appreciate its merits till they are informed of the personal history of the author. His father, Parker Clare, was laborer to a farmer, but through poverty and sickness became helpless, and is now a pauper on the parish, at five shillings per week. John was born at Helpstone, near Peterborough, Northamptonshire, 13th July, 1793. He early evinced a taste for study, and through three years contrived occasionally to save as much pence as paid for schooling at broken periods, and at the end of that time he was able to read the Bible. The first books which he had an opportunity of reading were the Seasons, Robinson Crusoe, and a Poem by Pomfret. By these he was instantly attracted; and, pursuing his desire for knowledge, he learned to write from the kind instruction of Mr. John Turnill. He cultivated his mind in silence and misfortune for thirteen years.

“In December 1818, Mr. Edward Drury, Bookseller, Stamford, met by chance with the Sonnet to the setting Sun, written on a piece of paper in which a letter had been wrapt up, and signed J. C. Having ascertained the name and residence of the writer, he went to Helpstone, where he saw some other poems with which he was much pleased. At his request Clare made a collection of the pieces he had written, and added some others to them. They were then sent to London for the opinion of the publishers, and they selected those which form the present volume.”

The destinies that ruled the fates of Otway and Chatterton, led them through distress and sorrow to the tomb—they both died of want; and it is melancholy to observe the misfortunes which almost invariably accompany Genius, as if there was a spell about her that shut out the consolation and assistance which is offered to common misery—

In the woods of the North, there are insects that prey  
On the brains of the elk 'till his very last sigh—  
Oh! Genius, thy patrons, more cruel than they,  
Just feed on thy brains, and then leave thee to die!<sup>3</sup>



Ye fawning flattering slaves I hate ye:  
Mad, harum-scarum!  
If rags and tatters under-rate me,  
Free still I'll wear 'em.—p. 89.

Our author is extremely natural in his descriptions of rural life; he delineates what passes every day in his own mind, and before his eyes; and when he raises compassion for the misfortunes of the poor peasants, he excites our pity for himself. We cannot avoid extracting the following picture of Labor from an “*Address to Plenty*.”

Toiling in the naked fields,  
Where no bush a shelter yields,  
Needy labor dithering stands,  
Beats and blows his numbing hands;  
And upon the crumping snows  
Stamps in vain to warm his toes.  
Leaves are fled that once had power  
To resist a summer shower;  
And the wind so piercing blows,  
Winnowing small the drifting snows,  
The summer shade of loaded bough  
Would vainly boast a shelter now:  
Piercing snows so searching fall,  
They sift a passage thro' them all.  
Tho' all's vain to keep him warm,  
Poverty must brave the storm.  
Friendship none, its aid to lend:  
Health alone his only friend;  
Granting leave to live in pain,  
Giving strength to toil in vain;  
To be, while winter's horrors last,  
The sport of every pelting blast.—p. 47-8.

There is a simplicity about this that has been rarely equalled; the recollections of *L'Allegro* stole over us: but Milton is all the scholar—Clare the poet of Nature. Amongst other pieces which this little volume contains, we noticed two—the “*Summer Morning*” and “*Summer Evening*,” and we have seldom met with descriptions of country life altogether so beautiful and unaffected. His talents, however, are not confined to this kind of Poetry, for he is capable of bold and animated thoughts.—The following is a specimen:

*Sonnet.—A Winter Scene.*

Hail, scenes of desolation and despair,  
Keen winter's overbearing sport and scorn!  
Torn by his rage, in ruins as you are,  
To me more pleasing than a summer's morn  
Your shattered state appears,—despoiled and bare,  
Striped of your clothing, naked and forlorn:  
Yes, winter's havock! wretched as you shine,  
Dismal to others as your fate may seem,  
Your fate is pleasing to this heart of mine,  
Your wildest horrors I the most esteem.  
The ice-bound floods, that still with rigour freeze,  
The snow-clothed valley, and the naked tree,  
These sympathising scenes my heart can please,  
Distress is their's—and they resemble me.

Of the wild and picturesque, we could not select a better example than this little Sonnet:

*The Gipsy's Evening Blaze.*

To me how wildly pleasing is that scene,  
That doth present, in evening's dusky hour,  
A group of Gipseys, entered on the green,  
In some warm nook where Boreas has no power;  
Where sudden starts the quivering blaze behind  
Short, shrubby bushes, nibbled by the sheep,  
That mostly on the short sward pastures keep;  
Now lost, now seen, now bending with the wind:  
And now the swarthy sybil kneels reclined,  
With progging stick she still renews the blaze,  
Forming bright sparks to twinkle from the flaze.  
When this I view, the all-attentive mind  
Will oft exclaim (so strong the scene pervades)  
"Grant me this life, thou spirit of the shades!"

There is a philosophy in the human mind which science may refine, but cannot improve—it is that which enables us to reason on our own misfortunes and infirmities, and to bear our distresses with firmness in the anticipation of a future change: the strong mind can argue itself into calm and undisturbed resignation without one principle of logic, and can select for its improvement a hundred lessons from the incidents that pass around it, without deducing a single moral from the wisdom

of books. Such is the philosophy of John Clare—and what heart will not be convinced of its value from the perusal of the following lines:

*On a lost Greyhound, found in the Snow.*

\* \* \* \* \*

For dogs, as men, are equally  
A link of nature's chain,  
Formed by that hand that formed me,  
Which formeth nought in vain.  
All life contains, as 'twere by chains,  
From him still perfect are;  
Nor does he think the meanest link  
Unworthy of his care.

So let us both on him rely,  
And he'll for us provide;  
Find us a shelter warm and dry  
And every thing beside.  
And while fools, void of sense, deride  
My tenderness to thee;  
I'll take thee home, from whence I've come;  
So rise and gang with me.

The unpleasant part of our duty yet remains.—We have selected some of the beauties of these Poems, and we have yet to shew some of their defects. That he has written ungrammatically or incorrectly, we should not, perhaps, pause to condemn—considering the circumstances of his education. The following are glaring solecisms:

Resolved never *more* to behold you *again*.—p. 144.  
*Demeanor's softness* in thy crimped face.—p. 109.

But we must own that the line

Thou little insect infinitely small.—p. 200.

contains an impropriety which we are surprised the publishers passed without notice.

He often uses peculiar expressions—sometimes perfectly novel—frequently making verbs of adjectives, &c.

Springs pencil *pinks* thee in thy *blushy* stain,  
And summer glistens in thy *tinty* flower.—p. 109.

He has also another peculiarity, which is that of contracting words to accommodate the metre—

E'en *'plaining* flies to thee have spoke.—p. 100.  
Our meeting *'minds* me of a pleasant hour.—p. 109.  
Sleep *'gins* close the labourer's eye.—p. 125.

We will now take leave of Mr. Clare, and would add, that he is one of those whom we will be glad to meet often; there is an originality about him which we admire; but that honest disdain of power and wealth—that independence of spirit—that natural pride of heart—are all—all Burns'; and Clare wants the bursts of feeling—the bold and careless, yet nervous expressions that belong so peculiarly to the other. We think that if he would attach himself to the composition of a poem of some length, he would bring his genius to a trial where it would meet better success—these short and desultory pieces have but limited circulation, while an interesting fiction never wants admirers.

## NOTES

1. No reference to the *Dublin Inquisitor* review appears in any of the existing Clare literature, including *Critical Heritage*, Barbara Estermann, *John Clare: An Annotated Primary and Secondary Bibliography* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985) and H. O. Dendurent, *John Clare: A Reference Guide*, ed. by Marilyn Gaull (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1978). More puzzlingly the *Dublin Inquisitor* is uncatalogued by surveys and bibliographies of periodicals of the period, such as: Tom Clyde, *Irish Literary Magazines: An Outline History and Descriptive Bibliography* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2003); *Three Hundred Years of Irish Periodicals*, ed. by Barbara Hayley and Enda McKay (Gigginstown: Lilliput Press, 1987); D. Kennedy, *Union List of Current Periodicals and Serials in Dublin Libraries* (Dublin: Irish Association for Documentation, 1959); Alvin Sullivan, *British Literary Magazines* (New York and London: Greenwood, 1983-6). The *Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature*, ed. by Joanne Shattock, Vol. 4, 1800-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) does mention the *Inquisitor*, but only as the site of a review of Walter Scott's *Kenilworth*, and it is not indexed elsewhere. Francis Espinasse refers to the magazine in the *Dictionary of National Biography* in the entry for writer and editor Robert Bell (1800-1867), who was a founding contributor to the *Dublin Inquisitor*, and who later became proprietor of the *Monthly Chronicle*.

2. The copy text is *The Dublin Inquisitor*, 1 (January 1821), pp. 58-63. It is stocked by the Harvard College Library (which is the copy available via Google Book Search), the National Library of Ireland, the British Library and Cambridge University Library.

3. These lines are slightly misquoted from Thomas Moore (1779-1852), 'Lines on the Death of Sh-r-d-n' (Richard Brinsley Sheridan, [1751-1816]). The original stanza appears with an interesting footnote, as follows:

In the woods of the North there are insects that prey

On the brain of the elk till his very last sigh;\*

Oh, Genius! thy patrons, more cruel than they,

First feed on thy brains, and then leave thee to die!

\* Naturalists have observed that, upon dissecting an elk, there was found in its head some large flies, with its brain almost eaten away by them.—*History of Poland*.

*The Fudge Family in Paris* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1818), p. 164.

4. Thomas Dermody (1775-1802), was a precocious, poor Irish poet from Ennis, County Clare, who fell on hard times and died young, partly due to persistent alcoholism. See James Grant Raymond, *The Life of Thomas Dermody* (London: William Miller, 1806) and *Dictionary of National Biography*.

5. These lines are slightly misquoted from Thomas Otway (1652-1685), *Venice Preserv'd: or, a Plot Discover'd*. The original quotation reads: 'Yet now must fall like a full Ear of Corn, / Whose Blossom scap'd, yet's wither'd in the ripening.' Act 1, Scene 1, *The Works of Mr. Thomas Otway* (London: C. Hitch and L. Hawes et al, 1757), p. 231.

# Abbreviations

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

COTTAGE TALES *John Clare, Cottage Tales*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-NAG and Carcanet, 1993)

CRITICAL HERITAGE *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973)

DEACON George Deacon, *John Clare and the Folk Tradition* (London: Sinclair Browne, 1983)

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

HAUGHTON Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips and Geoffrey Summerfield (eds), *John Clare in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994)

JCSJ *The John Clare Society Journal* (1982–)

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

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

MIDDLE PERIOD (I–II) *John Clare, Poems of the Middle Period 1822–1837*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (two volumes, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996); (III–IV) (1998): (V) (2003)

MIDSUMMER CUSHION *John Clare, The Midsummer Cushion*, ed. Kelsey Thornton and Anne Tibble (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-NAG and Carcanet, revised edition, 1990)

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

NORTHBOROUGH SONNETS *John Clare, Northborough Sonnets*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and P.M.S. Dawson (Ashington and Manchester: Mid-NAG and Carcanet, 1995)

OXFORD AUTHORS *The Oxford Authors: John Clare*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984)

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

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

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