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SIMON KÖVESI AND SCOTT MCEATHRON (eds.), *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. xii + 244. £64.99 hardback. 978 1 107 03111 1.

Designed to reflect ‘the shift in the quality and range of interest in Clare across the past twenty years or so’ (8), Simon Kövesi’s and Scott McEathron’s *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community* does justice to their hypothesis, articulated in the introduction, that ‘perhaps we no longer need be concerned about Clare’s place in the canon’ (7). Featuring a strong cast of contributors, the collection is comprised of ten new essays divided under the three subheadings listed in its title – ‘Poetry’, ‘Culture’ and ‘Community’. The book takes advantage of this broad span to spotlight the diversity of current critical work on Clare, demonstrating the openness of the poet’s life and work to an array of approaches and perspectives.

In foregrounding Clare’s relative underappreciation prior to the twentieth century, Kövesi’s and McEathron’s introduction works to free contributors from the burden of framing their responses in ‘justifications of [Clare’s] value, or even by preliminary discussions of the phenomenon of labouring class poetry’ (9). The approach affords contributors the freedom to explore how Clare’s status as a ‘thinking artist’ (10) colours his career, proposed by the editors as the collection’s strongest unifying principle. The book’s self-confessed existence in ‘a moment [...] of interpretative capaciousness’ (9) is its greatest strength, yet remarks of this nature can also, at times, seem close to a concession. Though the editors press home an emphasis on variety, rightly brought to the fore given the diversity of Clare’s art, the collection might, on occasion, benefit from uniting its always insightful readings with a slightly narrower focus. These comments notwithstanding, the book achieves what it sets out to do; Kövesi and McEathron capture a cross-pollinating critical landscape where Clare, ‘no longer on the margins’, is a poet for whom ‘any centrally agreed ground has been [productively] dissolved’ (7).

Opening the book’s section on ‘Poetry’, Fiona Stafford’s essay on ‘John Clare’s colours’ demonstrates Clare’s idiosyncrasy as thinker and as writer. The topic gives Stafford a platform from which she reads closely and deeply, as in her comments on the importance of ‘greenness’ in ‘The wind blows happily on everything’. That reading in particular is valuable for the way it brings out the ‘risk’ (18) of Clare’s unconventional poetics, in this case through his subtly varying repetition of ‘the same, simple word six times in a nine-line stanza’ (18). Elsewhere, Stafford’s focus is on situating Clare’s achievements within the context of the visual arts, particularly his enthusiasm for the works of DeWint. What Clare prizes in DeWint is his ability to capture nature’s immensity, and to create an art of possibility that invites the exploratory involvement of an active onlooker. After readings of various poems, this provides fertile ground for the essay’s conclusive examination of Clare’s ‘nest poems’, poems that, in their delicate blends of tone and feeling, highlight the sensitivity of Stafford as a reader. There, colour is shown to create not just an air of possibility, but also the very desirability that renders the eggs vulnerable to predators, including the predatory instincts of readers. Colour, for Stafford, becomes Clare’s means of plumbing new emotional depths; for this poet of ‘multi-dimensional experience’ (35), colour allows us to look at a given object or situation in multiple ways, balancing awareness of ‘the beauty of the sharply visualised exterior’ with ‘the less immediately obvious possibilities within’ (35). These observations suggest the importance of empathy in Clare’s poetics, and in that regard, Stafford’s discussion engagingly sheds light on Emma Mason’s later, contrasting essay.

In the second chapter, 'John Clare, William Cowper and the eighteenth century', Adam Rounce carefully charts Clare's movement from 'near emulation' to a slight 'but always precise' distinction from his predecessor (38), arguing that while both poets represent marginal figures in their work, Clare's perspective 'tends to challenge the reader's preconceptions' (47) in a way that Cowper's does not. Following this and closing the section on 'Poetry' is Sarah Zimmerman's essay, titled 'John Clare's conspiracy'. In centralising Clare's 'nest poems', Zimmerman picks up the baton from Stafford's earlier discussion. Though this raises the risk of a potential overlap across two of the book's three poetry-orientated chapters, the divergent pathways followed by the essays confirm the ability of Clare's writings to accommodate intriguingly diverse readings. For Zimmerman, Clare is a poet of plots, plans and conspiracies, all devised with a desire for privacy and solitude in mind. The essay shows this by skilfully weaving together contextual details, including the impact of celebrity culture and political pressures on Clare's longed-for domesticity, with readings of 'conspirational' poems that combine Clare's 'habitual modes of evasion and lush empirical description' (69). A series of nuanced close-readings stress the gendering of Clare's conspirational paradigm, the varying degrees of privacy experienced by birds including the snipe, sand martin and nightingale, and the way Clare's later poems optimistically depict scenes of a less transitory, more enduring seclusion. Delicately executed and always convincing, what stands out in Zimmerman's account is the care with which Clare manages tone, tentatively embracing the pleasures of privacy while ensuring it remains, right up to his final lines, an idealised and sought-for state.

Though discussion of Clare's poetry is present in the majority of the book's remaining essays, the quality of the opening essays does suggest that the 'Poetry' section, spanning three of the ten contributions, might have received a slightly wider coverage. If, as the editors remark, criticism of Clare has often been unadventurously framed in reductive readings of cultural factors such as class, close attention to the intricacies of Clare's nuanced artistry seems a valuable and perhaps underutilised corrective.

John Burnside opens the book's second section on 'Culture' with a lively polemical piece, affirming how Clare's dissidence and ethical sensibilities might aid our understanding of a contemporary culture that is itself subject to myriad new forms of enclosure. In chapter four, 'Ecology with religion: kinship in John Clare', Emma Mason argues for the importance of Clare's 'process of listening to the world' (97), which is seen to 'counter empirical modes of knowing' and 'necessitate a religious response to ecological crisis' (97). The result is a highly refined and incisive discussion, one that expertly balances the relevant theoretical approaches with references to the poetry. By navigating her reading through existing responses to the interplay of natural and supernatural in Clare, Mason presents an original take on Clare's unifying poetic vision. Clare is shown to be a poet that transcends binaries (i.e. the material and the immaterial) in his construction of an inclusive, communal poetics governed by a notion of 'kinship inclusive of all things' (98). Mason's ability to show this effort as contingent on both ecological consciousness and a reimagining of Christianity is what takes the essay into hitherto underexplored depths.

Following this are two engaging chapters from the collection's editors. Scott McEathron's 'The lives of Frederick Martin and the first Life of John Clare' is a thoroughly researched account that traces the 'unusually conflicted' (118) career of Martin, Clare's first biographer. Behaviours evident throughout Martin's professional life are shown to be prompted 'by his internalising [of] a series of pressures that, in the Life, he had identified as damaging to Clare' (141). In chapter seven, 'John Clare's deaths: poverty, education and poetry', Simon Kövesi

identifies death as a catalytic force possessing both material and visionary significance in Clare's career. A strength of the book, evident here, is how it presents Clare as an individual moulded by potentially conflicting impulses; for Kövesi, 'even at his most prophetic moments, even when thrown or disturbed, Clare exhibits a practicality, born of sheer material need' (147).

The book's final three essays, organised under the heading of 'Community', centre on Clare's relationships with his patrons, publishers and peers. Robert Heyes's 'John Clare's natural history' explores how Clare's aborted natural history project shaped his writing and the way his work was marketed, conducting detailed analysis of manuscripts to show Clare meditating on how best to utilise his talents. Chapter nine, by Sam Ward, is titled "'This is radical slang": John Clare, Admiral Lord Radstock and the Queen Caroline affair'. Taking its inspiration from Radstock's annotation on 'The Village Minstrel', it depicts an era of uncertain political allegiances and unique pressures of censorship, both of which posed a threat to the legitimacy of labouring class discourse. Closing the volume, Richard Cronin's essay on 'John Clare and the London Magazine' follows the lead of the collection's editors, who have both published essays related to this topic. Yet Cronin breaks new ground in exposing the tensions inherent in Clare's relationship with the magazine, arguing for a teasing blend of distinction and affinity between 'Cockney' and 'peasant' poets. Pervading Cronin's account is an alertness to Clare's liminal position in both literary and social circles, and how this alternately enhanced and restricted his work and life. Cronin shows how the London saw Clare as an 'antidote' (211) to the magazine's Cockneyism, exemplifying, in the words of the Monthly Review, an 'artless and unsophisticated' style that 'rescues his reader from the mass-produced language that characterised the print industry of the early nineteenth century' (212). That this rescuing occurs within a mass-produced magazine is one of many tensions unpicked by Cronin. His discussion shows that while contributors to the London were typically valued for their shifting, fluid identities, Clare was prized for, and forced to maintain, a comparatively fixed sense of self. When the essay outlines the restrictions that prevented Clare from engaging in the playfulness or self-mockery present in other London articles, the naturalness so often prized as Clare's hallmark is turned on its head. Authenticity itself becomes near-'illusory' (213), something inauthentically produced at the hands of market pressures. The skill with which Cronin steers his argument through these complexities makes this the collection's stand-out contribution.

Simon Kövesi's and Scott McEathron's collection represents an engaging and timely contribution to Clare studies, one most rewarding for the way it testifies to Clare's 'ongoing status as an uncategorizable literary and social misfit' (7). Under the stewardship of the contributors, Clare's status as a 'thinking artist' (10) seems assured; their essays confirm Clare's power to spark his readers into equally rich and diversified thought.

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