



John Clare: Voice of Freedom by R.S. Attack

Reviewed by Brian Hodgkinson

John Clare is generally recognised as a fine lyrical poet, who wrote idealistically about the English countryside, whilst contriving to overcome his extreme poverty and the unstable economic circumstance of the times. This short but powerful book reveals how inadequate such a view is of a man whose most abiding passion was for economic justice, rather than for literary success. He had indeed a gift for the lyrical, inspired by the beauty of his native land in Northamptonshire; yet even such poetry he described as ‘kicked out of the clods’.

W.G.Hoskins, historian of the English landscape, said of the pre-enclosure land that:

‘One must have been born and have worked all one’s life in such a landscape to understand its secret life, to be able to feel its poetry, and to express it.’

Clare was born early enough – in 1793 – to experience the independence and fulfilment that came with the unfettered occupation of land, but he lived to see the seizure of land by grasping enclosers, the consequent uprooting of families and their flight to become impoverished labourers:

‘Inclosure came and trampled on the grave
Of labour’s rights and left the poor a slave
.....
And birds and trees and flowers without a name
All sighed when lawless law’s enclosure came’

As the author boldly writes:

‘Clare mourned the destruction of a natural order which was more than just a change of fashion; the change was fundamental – it removed the independence of three-quarters of the English population. England was no longer ‘the land of the free’.

She shrewdly points out that whilst the trade in African slaves was abolished by Parliamentarians in 1806, there was ‘no such kindness for the growth of slavery in their own country.’ The legislature after all was where the enclosing Acts were being rapidly endorsed. For Clare meanwhile ‘the acts of driving stakes in the ground, re-routing rivers and fencing off the previously freely accessible commons, were done as to him.’

A concise but apposite account is given of Clare’s impoverished childhood, which was nevertheless leavened with books and teaching that his incipient genius demanded. His early poetry had some success, but we hear soon of the snares of literary life for one who was driven by a deep sense of the injustice of the time:

‘His message on the other hand was for those who had caused the growing poverty but who quite naturally did not want to be reminded – albeit in such an articulate, gifted way – of their culpability; hence the many pleas from his publishers and patrons to omit such references.’

With neat irony, the author writes that ‘he was patronised and his work suppressed by the same people’. Such lines as these were deleted from ‘Helpstone’ by the publishers, to Clare’s dismay:

‘Accursed wealth! O’er-bounding human laws
Of every evil thou remainst the cause:
Victims of want, those wretches such as me
Too truly lay their wretchedness to thee.’

‘The Fallen Elm’ could not get published at all, as it contained such explicit lines as:

‘But freedom’s cottage soon was thrust aside
And workhouse prisons raised upon the site.’

A moving account follows of Clare’s struggle to maintain a large family by working as a ploughman or labourer. Wages had fallen below subsistence level, as small farmers lost their holdings and became wage labourers forced to compete with each other for what work was left for them on the enlarged farms of the enclosing landlords. No doubt like many nameless others, the poet experienced a growing mental instability, undoubtedly fostered by his poverty and frustration at the general failure to appreciate the real import of his poetry – not lyricism for its own sake, but for the sake of justice.

The chapter on Clare’s final twenty-three years in Northampton Asylum is a poignant reminder of how a society divorced from the land may cause devastating trauma in those with an especially strong natural affinity for nature and a desire to live in harmony with it. Fortunately Clare was not badly treated. He was free to walk the banks of the River Nene and into Northampton town centre, where he was a familiar figure penning poems for the townsfolk and their children. His love of the countryside was unabated:

‘I make earth’s home my dwelling place,
For freedom’s love is all to me.’

Freedom was indeed his life's message to the world, but it was not political or civil freedom to which he aspired; it was the freedom to live and work on land not subject to a master and landlord. His was the great lost cause of free land. And yet, even today, the cause is not finally lost. Clare's poetry, with the aid of such books as Rosemary Attack's, may reveal to a new generation the need to return the land to its true heirs, the people of England.

A pithy conclusion reflects upon this forgotten but vital issue. Clare had 'highlighted the loss of a most important and basic human freedom; that of access to land in order to have a home in which to live and the space in which to work.' The author sees in the 19th century migration to the urban slums that provided cheap labour for the Industrial Revolution a close parallel with the landless poor huddled around major conurbations in developing countries and offering similarly cheap labour to the multi-nationals. It is a comparison that John Clare would have instantly recognised, for there lies the same injustice that led him to write so lyrically and yet so potently of the spoliation of his beloved Northamptonshire countryside.

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“Speak What We Feel Not What We Ought To Say”: King Lear Lecture Podcast by Vanessa Redgrave (including The Killing Fields documentary screening)

Reviewed by Jesper Raundall Christensen

If modern-day politics repulse you just a little bit, the quick-fix solution could be to turn towards just about any Shakespeare play for some gloomy perspective. That is of course if you want to become even more discouraged about human appetite for power, privilege, corruption and monopoly.

Discouraging or not, English actress Vanessa Redgrave does exactly that in this lecture podcast; and in the most eloquent way as one would expect. The podcast is part of the Humanitas visiting professorships at the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge. In addition to Redgrave's professorship in Drama the series has so far included such distinguished visiting professors as Jonathan Sacks in Interfaith Studies and Norman Foster in Architecture.

In this particular lecture Redgrave turns her attention to the treasured Shakespeare classic King Lear and gives insight into her interesting career in the film and media industry before switching the focus towards the issue of land economics.

The lecture shows Redgrave's genuine affection for King Lear acquired through an extensive Shakespearian acting career. Her insight and knowledge is splendid. Her presentation skills even more so. The early part of the lecture therefore shouldn't just be considered a treat for current or prospective drama students. The Oscar-winning actress captures an auditorium with her commendable presence and dignified demeanour. This was not only palpable for us attending the lecture at the Examination Schools in Oxford, even in the unforgiving format of a video podcast it is instantly recognizable.

In the latter part of the lecture we are presented with a documentary screening followed by a panel discussion. The documentary in question is *The Killing Fields*, narrated and presented by Fred Harrison of the Land Research Trust. The podcast can be recommended for the screening of this film alone. It takes a straightforward, honest – if slightly sentimental – look at the negatives externalities surrounding privatisation of natural resources and the consequent speculation in the economic rent with a conspicuous eye for the environmental damage found in its trail.

The concluding panel discussion is centred on both the Shakespeare-inspired part of the lecture and the political, economic and environmental issues raised in the documentary. In the debate Redgrave arguably comes through as a LVT proponent, although Fred Harrison and Carlo Nero, the latter being the producer of the documentary, head most of the economic discussion.

All in all the whole lecture is a thorough and kind-hearted effort from Vanessa Redgrave showing both her genuine passion for drama, and Shakespeare in particular, alongside her well-known social and political awareness in this case with a legitimate emphasis on the need for land reform.

Editor: This specific podcast (amongst others) can be viewed for free at: podcasts.ox.ac.uk/series/humanitas-visiting-professorships-universities-oxford-and-cambridge

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