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Northamptonshire Men of Letters

No. 1 John Clare; The Peasant Poet (1793-1864)

In the little village of Helpston, between Stamford and Peterborough, John Clare was born in July 1793. His home was a mere hut, wretched almost beyond description — “more like a prison than a human dwelling”. When quite a child he was sent to work in the fields and for some years he rarely left his occupation as a labourer.

It was when he was thirteen years of age that he showed signs of being a poet. He read Thomson’s “Seasons”, and almost immediately after began to write verse. This consisted mainly of poems jotted down on odd pieces of paper. Shortly after this he ran away from home and for some time led an errant life, living occasionally with gypsies, and picking up a living as best he could. In 1820, he married Martha Turner, the “Patty” of his poems.

Just after his marriage Clare became almost a beggar. His few remaining guineas had gone in printing a prospectus for some of his poems and he was forced to claim parish relief. By good luck his poems fell into the hands of Keats’ publishers, who issued them almost directly. The success was immediate; Clare was taken to London and for a few weeks he had a wild, gay time. Lords entertained him and he found many admirers, but few friends. He returned to Helpston, finding himself with an income of £45 per year.

On that income he thought he could live without working. He bought books and did little except read or wander in the open fields. But people had forgotten John Clare. He no longer found success and those to whom he appealed for help turned a deaf ear and he found himself poor and miserable. He again went to London but he was still as ill and wretched as ever. He still wrote

verses, now more copiously than ever in the vain hope of selling them for money to support himself and his family. Debts, however, accumulated, and his life was misery itself. Then, acting on the advice of a friend, he once more took to farming, and for a time seemed fairly prosperous. But again he fell sick and was given a little cottage three miles away from Helpston by one of his well-meaning patrons. Leaving his native place, however, was more than he could bear. He used to roam about, muttering incoherently and showing signs of madness.

A few years later he published a new book of poems called "The Rural Muse". That, like others, had a brief fame and then fell quietly away. Clare had now become more eccentric than ever and it was at last decided to send him to a private asylum in Epping Forest. There he received the kindest treatment and was allowed to act with as much freedom as possible. It was while in the asylum that Clare wrote many of his finest poems. There seems to be a touch in these later poems that his earlier work lacks — "a new joy as if he is at last at rest".

Although Clare was a simple peasant, his poetry was not wholly peasant poetry. He had a natural gift for writing verse and as he saw the things of nature he put them down. His work is full of everyday happenings, expressed in everyday language. He rarely realises when he is "original or obvious" in his poetry. He is full of the simple things and he loves them as he loves little else. He writes, not only as a clear observer of nature, but as a dear, close friend who knows her every way or whim. With this in mind, it is curious how the verse written in the madhouse is of finer quality than that written in his own nature haunts.

Clare was probably one of the most destitute of all poets. The surroundings in which he was born were wretched, while in after life, if the surroundings improved, his own faculties deteriorated and his mind was gone. His life — the later years especially — is touched with pathos. "The lines written in Northampton County Asylum" are particularly pathetic and echo Clare's great distress. Evidently the time spent in this asylum (the last twenty-two years of his life) was one of great loneliness. He laments this in these lines:

"I am! yet what I am none cares or knows,
My friends forsake me like a memory lost;
I am the self-consumer of my woes,
They rise and vanish in oblivious host,
Like shades in love and death's oblivion lost;
And yet I am! and live with shadows tost.

Into the nothingness of scorn and noise,
Into the living sea of waking dreams,
Where there is neither sense of life or joys,
But the vast shipwreck of my life's esteems;
And e'en the dearest — that I loved the best —
Are strange — nay, rather stranger than the rest.

I long for scenes where man has never trod;
A place where women never smil'd or wept;
There to abide with my creator, GOD,
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie;
The grass below — above the vaulted sky."

That his poems should have got so far in English Literature is astonishing, written as they were, on odd pieces of paper. But they at least are free from insanity; we see no mark of madness in them. They are simple as the author. On May 20 1864, his unhappy life came to an end and he lies buried at Helpston, under a sycamore tree; as he wished to be:

"The grass below — above the vaulted sky".