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JOHN CLARE
Selected Poems

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Clare's highly personal evocations of landscape and place are some of the most poignant lyrics in English poetry. His celebration of all forms of natural life and his laments for the death of rural England grew directly out of his intimate knowledge of the labourer's life, the wheatfields and hedgerows of his village in Northamptonshire.

This authoritative and engaging selection includes poems from every stage of Clare's poetic career, organised by theme, from 'Birds and Beasts' to 'Madhouses, Prisons and Whorehouses'.

Selected Poems Details

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John says

I savoured reading this – I can never read poetry quickly.

Geoffrey Summerfield's selection and notes and faithful reproduction of the poems enhanced the experience. The selection covers all poetically active periods of Clare's life, including his long incarceration in the asylum at Northampton where he died. His "mad" period included a number of poems where he assumed the Byronic persona. Some are very graphic in content and must have done wonders for Victorian sensibilities! Many poems are devoted to his early love, Mary, to whom he believed he was married (he wasn't) Some of these are very powerful.

His observations of nature and the seasons when working as a farm labourer and shepherd in rural Northants form some of my favourite poems. There are many words local to Northamptonshire and the dialect of Clare's particular area which he uses in his poems which enrich and interest. I suspect that many have now disappeared from everyday use.

matilda says

I am a huge fan of poetry and John Clare is by far one of my favourite poets. This book contains most of his best sonnets and poems and includes a small timeline of his life.

My only criticism is that it does not contain all of his poems however it was perfect for when I had a little spare time to pick up a poetry book and enjoying a poem or two.

Jude Brigley says

Have been reading Clare's poems throughout the year and reminding myself how much I like them.

'The girning winds bit sharp and thin
And made the early riser blow his nails,
and crizzling frost shot needles in the dyke
and crumpt beneath the feet down grassy vales.'

I love 'crizzling', 'crumpt' and 'girning'.

Aneece says

It's troubling that his poetry improved as he went mad.

Ruth says

As a complete townie, I have very little in common with John Clare, who sought the "quiet joys" of rural life and took his inspiration from nature - "I found the poems in the fields, and only wrote them down." However, I really enjoyed his work and found much of it quite moving. His life was touched by some form of depression and his work is often melancholy, but his delight in the landscape, flora and fauna is touching.

Nimue Brown says

A broad selection of poems, some prose writing, a brief biography and a very good and useful introduction. As a place to start reading Clare, it's worked well for me, I can certainly recommend it. I'm not in the habit of reading entire poetry books beginning to end, but the presence of longer works, and the overall flow of the collection coupled with the very readable nature of the poetry made it possible to read this much as I would a prose text.

Clare is a fascinating poet in terms of his relationship with landscape, I found his troubled emotional life resonant, and he occupies a key moment in British landscape history - namely the coming of enclosures. The sense of loss in his work I found almost unbearable at times, and it makes for an uneasy parallel with our modern abuse of the land for fracking and the ongoing industrialisation of the landscape.

Sarah says

I cant wait for this book, I am in love with John Clare and his deep relationship with nature, I've known him by coincidence from reading some poems in a classic poetry book.

Jake says

Collection of poems I studied for my AS English Lit, some poems are truly brilliant (I Am, To John Clare, some of the nature ones) however some are just plain boring. He needed an editor, for example 'The Parish' could be three pages shorter and much better.

John says

What can you say if you like poetry you just have to love John Clare I particularly like the poems to Mary (Romantic In me I guess) When I first read this copy, the words I sleep with you I wake with you and yet you are not there, just kept going through my mind over and over.

Brandon says

I read this almost straight through as soon as I purchased it. This is the true country voice of the English Romantics...Wordsworth wished he could draw on the enormous rural knowledge that John Clare possessed. I can return to this time and time again.

T.E. Shepherd says

It's been a perennial ambition of mine to read more poetry. Unlike last year when I fulfilled an aim to read Tolstoy's *War & Peace*, poetry is much more of a struggle for me, and that pains me. I wonder whether that my aspergers and the way I 'read' things literally causes me an added problem with poetry where it is is, 'all' metaphor?

So why this volume of John Clare? And why now? I've been reading some nature writing recently, principally Melissa Harrison's *Autumn* and found myself exposed to his work. I also work with Simon Kövesi - one of the leading experts on John Clare - an instigator in the biopic, *By Ourselves* and I have found myself drawn to find out more about the man and his poetry.

This volume, edited by Jonathan Bate, is an excellent primer to one of our finest working class, romantic poets. Obstretrivly it's just a collection of his poetry, but I found it to be so much more than that. In the way that it's collected together it reads like an autobiography - an autobiography of verse and song. Starting with the innocence of the countryside and the village traditions, it moves through a period of 'fame' and into a more political phase, and then, a wayward abandom of directly critiquing society and the ruling classes, to a quiet reflection and introspection.

This is a volume of poetry that makes you realise how much we have lost of our heritage and our ways of doing things. Farming back then, was hard, backbreaking work but we were so more connected with nature and the natural rhythms of the seasons that we have lost by now. This makes me sad. At the same time, some of the most poignant of John Clare's poetry succeeds in giving optimism for the future.

Jamie says

(This is my first review, so pardon me if it's utter crap)

I read this for my English literature coursework and I have to say that I was quite impressed by it. The biography by Summerfield is succinct but eloquently informative, offering a perfectly summarised background of John Clare and a detailed analysis of his work. Following this brief but helpful biography is a selection of poetry that resonates very deeply for me. Known as "The Peasant Poet", Clare is nothing but a visionary as he imbues a sharp catharsis - a silver-tongued poignancy - into his perceptions of a harsh, brutal and near-apocalyptic world. This is perhaps realised best in his most famous poem "I AM", a poem lamenting the limitations and circumscriptions of physical existence (and in my opinion, though it's unfortunately not in this selection, "An Invite to Eternity").

"The Vanities of Life" and "Death" are also poems which resonate for me - though, to be honest, most of Clare's poems (bar one or two exceptions - I was quite impartial to "Don Juan", for example) bear a semblance of the red-hot eloquent poignancy of "I Am". Clare is certainly one of the most interesting poets

I've come across, and I can't help but share in some of his supposed -for want of a better word - 'unconventional' views on life.

That's all I'm going to say for the moment as I don't want to spoil his poetry for any of you. I highly recommend him as a romantic poet - even though his poetry may project the crisis of "a mind in conflict in itself", it's easy to see how Clare yet endeavoured to effect change in his materialistic late-Edwardian/early-Victorian society with his idyllic celebration of the natural world and all its blessings (pardon the sappiness).

A word of advice: do not read his poetry if you're in a bad mood or if you lack the means to read/watch something happy and uplifting afterwards. Trust me, you'll regret it.

Otherwise, 4.5 stars for both the biography and Clare's work.

Suzammah says

There are only so many sonnets about different British birds I can appreciate. He had a great poem about a badger getting revenge on some nasty country folk though, that was fun. Of course, when he's being a thoroughly miserable bastard and writing about inner turmoil rather than a lesser spotted sparrow, he's one of the best.

Sean Barrs the Bookdragon says

John Clare wrote some wonderful poems, but he also wrote some terribly basic ones. If you compare him to the other canonical poets of British Romanticism, then he can easily be criticised. He didn't have the flair of Byron or such control over sensuous imagery like Wordsworth and Shelley; he didn't have the imagination of Coleridge or the stylistic qualities of Keats. He didn't even have the lyricism of Blake. But what he did have was persistence, and a real awareness of himself and his surroundings. For me he stands in the shadows of his more developed brothers.

Does that make his poetry any better? No it doesn't. But it does mean that he can be appreciated more. Clare taught himself to read; he wasn't educated like the rest of the Romantics. He had a massive disadvantage. He learnt to write poetry by copying the style of his peers; he adapted it and made it his own, and eventually he developed his own poetic voice. Is this not something to admire? Clare was a shepherd, not a scholar or a literary critic or a pompous Lord. The early Romantics advocated oneness with nature; surely, out of the crowd Clare is the one with the most experience. He lived the rural life from the beginning, and his poetry reflects it so blatantly.

I have a great deal of respect for John Clare. To pull his poetry almost up to the exalted heights of such names I mentioned is a massive achievement for one who started like he did. I've seen his actual handwriting, and some of his early manuscripts. His penmanship is terrible and full of misspelt words and local colloquialisms. To be able change something like that into the final forms that were published is rather astonishing. I suppose if anything it shows what persistence can achieve, that and a good editor.

Now I've spoken a lot about Clare's hindrances but, don't mistake me, I think some of his poetry is really powerful. My favourite is "I am". I've copied it full here:

*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 shadows in love's frenzied stifled throes
And yet I am, and live—like vapours tossed*

*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 esteem;
Even the dearest that I loved the best
Are strange—nay, rather, stranger than the rest.*

*I long for scenes where man hath never trod
A place where woman never smiled 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.*

This is a great reading of it, even though it misses the second stanza; it is very much worth hearing. It's very touching: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDgEq...>

Isn't *Penny Dreadful* just great?

One thing Clare did do better than the other Romantics was really explore the animal kingdom. He didn't just write about Nightingales; he used so many birds and woodland life. He was a real advocate of nature. Had he been alive today he would have been an activist or an animal rights campaigner. In this, he was ahead of his time; yes, many in the early nineteenth century shared these views, Robert Burns included, but Clare really explored them in real depth in his poetry.

Some of his other poems that I thought were worthy of note are "What is life?" "The Wren" and "Remembrances." Reembraces has some of my favourite Clare lines in it. It really shows the effects of big laws on the little man:

*By Langley bush I roam but the bush hath left its hill
On cowper green I stray tis a desert strange and chill
And spreading lea close oak ere decay had penned its will
To the axe of the spoiler and self interest fell a prey
And cross berry way and old round oaks narrow lane
With its hollow trees like pulpits I shall never see again
Enclosure like a Buonaparte let not a thing remain
It levelled every bush and tree and levelled every hill*

*And hung the moles for traitors - though the brook is running still
It runs a naked brook cold and chill*

Such wonderful stuff. I may have preferred the poetry of the other Romantics, but I enjoyed studying Clare the most. He has a real human story, one that's reflected in his poetry. For me, he was the most relatable of the literary figures of his age. Maybe it's because I come from the same part of England or perhaps it's because "I am" is a poem I feel a great affinity with. Either way, Clare is a man I admire. I respect people who aren't naturally intelligent, or haven't had the opportunities afforded to others, but yet they still succeed through their own willpower.

I hope you enjoyed my review, and the poems I picked out. I enjoyed writing this more than most of the things I post. I've decided that I simply must write reviews for the works of the other Romantics, and perhaps more poetry in general. Personally, I don't think there's enough reviews of poetry on goodreads.

Leila says

I really loved John Clare's poems about nature.
