JOHN CLARE

POEMS

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info

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BIOGRAPHY AND COMMENT

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In tracing the origin of JOHN CLARE it is not necessary to go very far back, reference to his grandfather and grandmother being a sufficient acknowledgement of the claims of genealogy. Following the road at haphazard, trusting himself entirely to the guidance of fortune, and relying for provender upon his skill in drawing from a violin tunes of the battle and the dance, about thirty years before Helpstone heard the first wail of its infant poet, there arrived at the village the vagabond and truculent Parker. Born under a wandering star, this man had footed it through many a country of Europe, careless whether daily necessity required from him an act of bloodshed or the scraping of a harum-scarum reel designed to set frolic in the toes of man and maid. At the time of his reaching Helpstone, a Northamptonshire village, destined to come into prominence because of the lyrics of its chief son, it happened that the children were without a schoolmaster. In his time the adventurer had played many parts. Why should he not add to the list? Effrontery, backed up by an uncertain amount of superficial attainment, won the day, and this fiddling Odysseus obtained the vacant position. Of his boastings, his bowings, his drinkings, there is no need to make history, but his soft tongue demands a moment of attention. We may take it for granted that he picked out the fairest flower among the maids of Helpstone as the target for all the darts at his disposal, each of which, we may be sure, was polished by use. The daughter of the parish clerk

was a fortress easy to capture. Depicted by himself, the rascal loomed as a hero; till at last the affair proceeded beyond a mere kiss, and the poor girl pleaded for the offices of a priest in order to save her child from the stain of illegitimacy. However, the schoolmaster proved glib of promises, but fleet of foot, for on the day following his sweetheart's revelations he was nowhere to be found. In the course of time JOHN CLARE'S father was born. In his turn, he grew into the want of a mate, found her, married her, and begot an honour for England.

JOHN CLARE was born at Helpstone, on the 13th day of July, 1793, and born into a heritage of handicaps. To say nothing of the fruits of exposure to rough weathers which were ripening in his father's system, the boy had the disadvantage of being one of twins, a sister accompanying him into the world. His mother suffered from dropsy, and we may well believe that what life the children sucked from her breast contained elements threatening their future health. Small and frail, the lad had the additional misfortune to open his eyes in the cottage of a pauper, instead of in some abode where his natural weakness could have been nourished by foods giving inward encouragement, and of a sort sure to result in the building up of hearty fibre. Despite all these early rebuffs, JOHN CLARE kept hold of life. When still very young he set out full of faith to explore the junction of earth and heaven, for on the horizon he could see the point of their meeting. In this incident, as well as in many another of his childhood, it is easy to detect signs of a spirit triumphantly unfitted for residence in a clay hovel at Helpstone. As luck would have it, a kind of rough-and-ready

poetry was not altogether out of the boy’s reach, for his father’s head was stuffed with innumerable odds-and-ends of rhyme, some of which he was in the habit of reciting to his son. Entertainment of the same sort was obtainable from old Granny Bains, a weather-worn cow-herd, to whom the future poet was attracted by her store of ditties; whose especial cronies were the wind and rain. Under such illiterate tutors little JOHN CLARE moved closer and closer to the soul of poetry, musing while he put a limit to the vagrancy of the geese and sheep for which he had been appointed guardian as soon as the main part of his schooling was over. His departure from the scholastic bench took place when his years had reached a very unripe total, for with only seven birthdays entered in his book of life, at an age when a child is usually at the commencement of historical and geographical perplexities, he was turned out into the fields as a wage-earner. Instead of feeling elated at his escape from the scholastic coils of Dame Bullimore, as many a lad would have done, JOHN CLARE, being aware of his budding wits, although unable to comprehend the motive force from within, looked round his small district in search of fresh educational territories to be conquered by his brain. Having saved a few pence he made overtures to Mr. James Merrishaw, the schoolmaster of Glinton, and in the duller months of the year, when days were short, he attended certain evening classes, notwithstanding the fact that the journeys involved taxed his boot-leather severely; for Glinton is nearly five miles away from Helpstone. Here he learned well, but not altogether wisely, if we may agree that the boy’s struggles with the intricacies of algebra were

conspicuous for mis-applied energy. But something more valuable than baffling equations resulted from JOHN CLARE'S connection with the sage of Glinton, for Mr. Merrishaw made him free of his books, thus feeding more and more that desire for knowledge which sprang up in him not less rapidly than a mushroom grows in a meadow.

Even in such a loose piece of biography as this—an essay which has no other aim than to glance in passing at the salient features of CLARE'S career—a little space must be spared for mention of the boy's year of service as factotum at the "Blue Bell" at Helpstone, where he had almost as much leisure as work, because it was here that his hermitical notions and moods of dream increased at an extraordinary rate. Served by travelling pedlars, whose packs let him share in fancy the terror of Red Riding Hood, the adventures of Valentine and Orson, to say no word of Sinbad's amazements, the small student entered for the first time into the recesses of fairy land, there to lave his hands in its abundant jewels, while making extortionate demands upon the swiftness of genies. Little by little, algebra went to the wall, yielding as much to the boy's spreading passion for Nature's feast of grass and flowers, as for the limitless enchantments born of imagination, since at this period the list of impulses communicated to him by wayside blossoms, by clouds, by winds, and by the easy ballads of thrushes, daily grew longer. The boy began to appreciate the largeness of God's school as compared with the limits reigned over by Dame Bullimore and the pedagogue of Glinton; and his increasing sense of hearing enabled him to receive into his understanding fragments of

those sermons which are preached by stones. Hunger for expansion lived and lusted in his heart. No better example of this fury of craving could be adduced than the story of how the young poet entered into a combat with circumstances in order that he might obtain a copy of Thomson's "Seasons." Mental agony, as well as a superlative degree of hoarding, went to the purchase of that coveted volume, the history of which is fully set forth in Mr. Frederick Martin's stimulating "Life of John Clare." During these glowing months the boy of genius had not ceased from utilising every chance scrap of paper for the purpose of jotting down his exercises in rhyme. By means of a forgivable trick he secured the verbal patronage of his father and mother, who could not see any merit in his verses till he pretended that they were the compositions of others. As poem after poem was written their author stored them in a cranny in the wall, a retreat at last invaded by Mrs. Clare, with the result that she was wont to help the boiling of the kettle by burning underneath it the early pipings of her son.

At this point, the youth in whose story the interest lies being sixteen years old, Cupid, with no loss of his bright qualities after so many centuries of exercise, comes into the recital. To JOHN CLARE, who was moving rapidly towards the full worship of all things lovely, Mary Joyce appeared to be nobody less bewildering and enchanting than a stray from heaven; and though he was prevented from wearing her, the dice of Fortune falling adverse from the box, he never ceased to regard her as his ideal. Of the many pathetic incidents of his life not the least touching is the fact that in

his years of a broken brain he cherished as a chief delusion the belief that Mary Joyce was indeed his wife. What the feelings of a nature so intense were when the father of his sweetheart intervened as the proverbial slip between the cup and the lip, we can only conjecture, though the tracing of results is easy enough. After leaving the tankards and the horses of the “Blue Bell,” John Clare cast about him for some other form of employment. Escaping the pains of stone-cutting and cobbling, he succeeded in becoming a gardener’s apprentice at Burghley Park, the seat of the Marquis of Exeter. Parker Clare began to think that his son was born with an invisible silver spoon in his mouth, while to John eight shillings a week, with lodging free, smacked of the robbers’ cave in the “Arabian Nights.” In reality, this position was altogether undesirable, for the head gardener, not content to degrade himself alone by an excessive swallowing of stimulants, actually devoted his best efforts to make drunkards of his pupils. Unfortunately temptation loomed large at the very moment when Clare was ripe for mischief. Romance was worsted by swipes (the indignity of the episode may be held to excuse the slang); by means of such thin nepenthe, regret for the loss of Mary Joyce grew less and less; and it not infrequently occurred that the new apprentice slept off his potations by the hedge-side, with no better blanket than a mist, and with the damp turf for sole mattress, thus unconsciously taking in a cargo of ague and fever for future unloading. At last Clare, in company with another lad who was anxious to show a clean pair of heels to the abstract and concrete brutalities of his master, fled to Grantham, and thence to Newark-upon-Trent, where both

the runaways obtained work under a nurseryman. But Clare was homesick; his mother's face was as a magnet pulling him to the familiar hovel at Helpstone; no longer could he obey that decree of divorce from his native scenes pronounced against him by the impalpable judge and jury of circumstance. One day, after a terrible journey on foot, he burst into the hut of his parents, weeping for joy to gain for his body the residence which his spirit had occupied so long.

No sooner had Clare returned his muscles to the various tasks of a farm labourer than he harked back with a love greater than ever to Thomson's "Seasons," reading it as he went to and from his work. The chief part of his leisure he used for the composition of verses, an occupation which served to fix upon him habits of timidity and shyness, especially as he was without a single sympathiser. Because of his strange manners, his fits of abstraction as well as of uttered enthusiasm, his appetite for solitude, the neighbours passed from mere mockery to whispers of a mind diseased, and even of a nature beset by the black ministers of magic. The fact that about this time his mother, for the purposes of fuel, made a clean sweep of his poetic accumulations did its share to loosen his moral control; and when his attempts at gaining encouragement from Mr. Thomas Porter, and patronage from Lord Milton, to whom the parish clerk of Helpstone displayed the rustic poet, failed, he betook himself, this time of his own accord, to the drunken company of the worst livers in the village. Much of Clare's future misery proceeded from this lapse. Before bad example had done its utmost to ruin him, Providence, in the somewhat unusual disguise of a recruiting sergeant, came

to the rescue. JOHN'S period of military service was brief, for after being instructed at Oundle in the goose-step—that foundation of a glorious career under arms—the corps of which he was a member was disbanded, and he was enabled once more to assume the civilian smock at Helpstone. For all booty he had a second-rate copy of "Paradise Lost" and "The Tempest." A matter of more importance, however, was the fact that he had departed from the pernicious influence of the roysterers who were leading him to destruction. A number of small adventures were not slow to follow his short intimacy with the clothes and tools of war, what with his trial of a gipsy's life, and his courting of several girls, one of whom, Elizabeth Newton by name, drove him into a fit of melancholy by playing the part of a jilt. In this state of mind nothing could have suited him better than change of scene, and his departure to Bridge Casterton, there to learn the details of a lime-burner's trade, happened at a moment fortunate for heart and head alike. It was while he resided in this neighbourhood that he confided to Mr. Henson, a bookseller of Market Deeping, the fact of his colloquy with the Muse, following the avowal by a display of his powers. This confession was the germ of a wide circulation.

And now we are arrived at a fresh, and, as far as matrimony is concerned, a final love. CLARE being now twenty-four years of age, it was high time for him to nurse an established affection, and he was lucky to win the heart of Martha Turner, the "Patty" of several poems to be found in the collected works of the poet. To him Martha was another waif from the skies, even though she tortured her

poetical admirer by the time-honoured practice of appearing to waver between two suitors. The conduct of this episode was made up of petty events prosaic enough to the onlooker, but sufficiently lethal for the parties most interested. Tiffs, sour looks from parents, despairs, showers, rainbows, were the constituents of Clare's courtship. A flat and always fortunate wooing would doubtless have been hostile to poetry. Because of his longing to supply two mouths with the necessaries of life, and because it was clearly proved that Cupid would not even be able to munch a satisfactory portion of crust if the lovers founded their faith solely on the wage of a lime-burner, Clare conceived the idea of publishing a volume of song, his mind appointing Mr. Henson, of Market Deeping, a comrade for his project. A month devoted to the base uses of the treadmill would not have cost the poet more labour than did the composition of his prospectus, three hundred copies of which the bookseller agreed to print, as well as a specimen sonnet, for one pound. But this trap for subscribers was baited with too much candour. If ever a poet met with a crushing response to his first appeal for a hearing, surely John Clare was that man. Seven patrons came forward, more, we may guess, in kindness than in hope of literary luxury. Clare, of course, experienced the superlatives of disgust; and when the printer of the artless prospectus wrote to inform him that the adventure must drop unless fifteen pounds appeared to back it up, he could not withhold himself from replying in a strain to the last degree impolitic. To add to his griefs, a rather wide gulf was at this time yawning between Martha Turner and himself, the bridging of which was a feat of

engineering extremely hard to accomplish. Moreover, and here is an illustration of the proverb that it never rains but it pours, the owner of the limekilns discharged his lyrical servant on the score of his inattention to business. The whole neighbourhood being somewhat scandalised at what was considered presumption, for labourers of Clare's type were not required to assert themselves in prose, much less in poetry, the disappointed lime-burner, with a heart given up to aching, returned once more to Helpstone, where he would have starved but for parochial relief. So genius sat down to eat the parish loaf.

However tightly twisted the rosebud may be, windy and sunny fingers will unpack it at last. At the very moment when Clare was reading himself as the peculiar prey of disaster, he was destined to behold the bright back of the cloud which had confronted him with such ominous persistence. By strange approaches the news of *Clare's* devotion to and production of poetry arrived at Mr. Drury, a bookseller who was on the point of taking over a business at Stamford from Mr. Thompson, of that town. In company with a friend, Mr. Drury proceeded to Helpstone, interviewed the astonished poet, glanced through some rhymed samples, and finally declared his intention to publish a volume at his own risk, hearing which intelligence Clare once more rose heavenward in the balloon of hope, forgetting how certain it was that impediments to free flight would make themselves manifest. Owing to the offices of Mr. Drury, Clare became acquainted with Mr. Gilchrist, of Stamford, a gentlemen with an Oxford education and a grocer's shop, who played the part of a true friend to the poet, if we except his action in

making public some verses of Clare's which had more wine than inspiration in them. It has been contended that Mr. Gilchrist filled the post of patron with a want of reserve which made Clare feel his position acutely; for the eating of humble-pie has never been a really popular amusement. Be this as it may, lovers of "Poems descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery" have a great deal for which to thank Mr. Gilchrist. After promising Clare to undertake the publication of his first book, Mr. Drury experienced a few bad hours. To begin with, the ill-spelt, rope-tied, unpunctuated mass of manuscript entrusted to him by its author had a most unpromising aspect. He tested it as best he could, but, as the glow of the adventure had already faded a little, found no particular reasons for comfort. In this strait he enlisted the acumen of an acquaintance, a clergyman, whose name was, somewhat appropriately, Twopenny, in order to see how the verses might strike a contemporary. The prophetic Twopenny, with brutal candour, described Clare's bundle of reeds to be so much twaddle. When Mr. Drury delivered this oracle, the grief of the poet was such that the bookseller was shocked. Had it not been for the anguish of the singer, it is quite possible that the bookseller of Stamford would have departed, with decent circuity, from his bargain; as it was, he determined to procure yet another opinion. He happened to be a relative of Mr. John Taylor, the London publisher, to whom he despatched the uncouth manuscript in question. Mr. Taylor's were not as Mr. Twopenny's eyes. He knew diamonds when he saw them, even though a polisher had not exerted his craft upon them.