THE POETRY OF JOHN CLARE

Also by Mark Storey

CLARE : THE CRITICAL HERITAGE (*editor*)

THE
POETRY
OF
JOHN CLARE

A Critical Introduction

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Macmillan Education

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1974

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First published 1974 by

THE MACMILLAN PRESS LTD

London and Basingstoke

Associated companies in New York

Dublin Melbourne Johannesburg and Madras

SBN 333 15760 5

ISBN 978-1-349-02177-2 ISBN 978-1-349-02175-8 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-02175-8

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Preface

This book is intended to serve as an introduction to Clare's poetry. My own interest in Clare was aroused when I was an undergraduate, too many years ago; it has been sustained and enhanced by the enthusiasm of students with whom I have talked about Clare. In many ways, this book is for them, a very inadequate response to their requests for some sort of critical help with the poetry. Clearly, in a book of this scope, many things have had to be by-passed, many points left undeveloped: I have not tried to be comprehensive. There are three main lines of approach: I have tried to show, firstly, both in general and in particular, the special interest and appeal and variety of Clare's poetry; secondly, some of the ways in which his poetry seems to work; thirdly, the development of his poetry, the coherence of his work as a whole, from the early efforts to the achievements of maturity. I have discussed details of biography only where these illuminate the poetry, and have for the most part taken such details for granted. No attempt has been made to present a rounded picture of Clare the man, in all his diversity (for that is, primarily, the province of biography), but rather to see the man in terms of his poetry, which is, after all, what he asked of posterity. A new edition of *John Clare: A Life*, by J. W. and Anne Tibble (1972), strengthened me in my resolve not to repeat facts readily available elsewhere.

When I had nearly completed the typescript of this study, John Barrell's book, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place, 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge, 1972), was published. Dr Barrell has examined in great detail Clare's descriptive processes as they differ from the tradition represented by Thomson's *Seasons*. This is a stimulating book in many respects, in particular for its demonstration of the subtleties of Clare's technique especially as

exemplified in the sonnets. This present study differs in emphasis from Dr Barrell's: whereas he is interested especially in the idea of place, of the localness that so distinguishes Clare's verse in his middle period, before the move in 1832 to North-borough, I am concerned here with the more general question of Clare's development as a poet, descriptive and otherwise. I have chosen to take *The Shepherd's Calendar* as the focal point for an examination of Clare's mature descriptive technique.

The development of a poet such as Clare is of particular interest, for he faces peculiar problems, related to his own hesitancy and lack of confidence in his abilities (it is not yet possible entirely to discount his origins). To study this development, from the earliest gropings and imitations to the later poetry of vision, has seemed especially important in the case of a poet who is so often viewed in rather superficial terms (as if all his poetry were of the same kind and level of achievement). In order to understand the nature of his achievement (which is such that the usual evasive appellation 'minor poet' misses the point), Clare's early struggles are extremely relevant, as he attempts to translate his unique vision into poetry: for it is only with these difficulties in mind that we can appreciate the triumph of his mature work.

The early poetry is understandably humble. But Clare's humility becomes one of his greatest strengths, as he applies it to the writing of poetry about the beloved countryside of his youth: he transcends the limitations of an established genre, and makes of an enfeebled tradition something entirely personal and strong. But *The Shepherd's Calendar* and the sonnets were not the culmination of his work, merely important stages in the growth of a mind essentially visionary. Part of Clare's unique quality derives from this rooting of his vision in the actual; just as his descriptive poetry is seldom merely aesthetic or decorative, so his poems of yearning and dream depend upon a precise awareness of what it is that is lost.

If much of this study is concerned with Clare as a poet of nature, it is because that was the role which he chose for himself; but to speak disparagingly of him as a 'mere nature poet' hardly does him justice. The descriptive accuracy is linked not only to an increasing feel for the words and movement of

poetry, but also to a growing realisation of his unique position, as the representative of a way of life that is disappearing. At the same time he sees the essential importance of love and innocence, and these two aspects of the past become related, so that a personal loss is elevated and universalised. From these two concerns, much of Clare's best poetry grows. As the past, and the scenes of youth, assume increasing significance for Clare, so poetry itself, with all its connotations of nature, love and joy, becomes the embodiment of a vision of eternity which embraces past, present, and future.

It is that development which I have wanted to chart in this study. I have for the most part concentrated on Clare and his work, rather than try to place him in a more general context of, say, romanticism or the poetic climate of the first half of the nineteenth century: if that is a valid exercise, I have left it for others to perform. Similarly, while I hope my debts to (and disagreements with) others' work on Clare are clear enough, I have not engaged in shadow-boxing with earlier critics, entertaining though that might have been: anybody interested can always turn to the volume on Clare in the *Critical Heritage* series. It might seem odd that in a study of Clare and his work I appear to have shirked the business of 'placing' Clare. This is a problem that has exercised people's minds for a long time, and I think and hope that it will continue to do so: no atmosphere would be healthy in which it could be settled once and for all who was major and who minor (as if that solved everything anyway). As I have already suggested, 'minor' in Clare's case misses the point entirely: that, after all, is what the bulk of this book is about. However mistakenly, I have not seen it as my task to 'place' Clare in any magisterial, definitive way; I have resisted the temptation to toss grand epithets about, or even to add a separate conclusion in which Clare's poetic achievement could be mapped out in summarised form, and an appropriate number of marks awarded. So far as putting Clare in the context of his contemporaries is concerned, I should have said that he did not have the stature of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Byron, Keats or Shelley. But in saying that I would want to add that that is not necessarily an adverse reflection on Clare, who has his own very special, unique achievements: Geoffrey Grigson has applied the word 'momen-

tous' to Clare's poetry, and Donald Davie has spoken of it in terms of 'one kind of great poetry, sane, robust and astringent'. The underlying premise of this book is that such claims are not wild and irresponsible: I should not have written it if I had not thought Clare to be, at his best, a very good poet indeed, important and valuable, a poet we should cherish. He has still to receive the attention he deserves.

Acknowledgements

The author and publishers wish to thank the copyright-holders (named in brackets) who have kindly given permission for the use of extracts from the following:

The Later Poems of John Clare, ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (Manchester University Press)

John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar* (© Oxford University Press 1964)

Selected Poems and Prose of John Clare, chosen and ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield (© Eric Robinson 1967 and reprinted by permission of Curtis Brown Ltd)

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Textual Note

There is no edition of Clare's poetry that is both complete and reliable. In a critical work of this sort, where the quotations need to be full and frequent, compromise is inevitable. Wherever possible, I have followed the readings of the *Selected Poems and Prose* (1967) and *The Later Poems of John Clare* (1964), both edited by Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield. For *The Shepherd's Calendar* I have used the same editors' text of 1964. For some asylum poems I have followed *Poems of John Clare's Madness*, edited by Geoffrey Grigson (1949). Otherwise, unless the notes indicate another source, the text used is that of *The Poems of John Clare*, edited in two volumes by J. W. Tibble in 1935. Whatever text I have used in any particular instance, I have tried to give in the notes references to whatever versions occur in the other volumes I have mentioned.

In the notes the following abbreviations have been used :

Eg.	British Museum MS. Egerton 2245-50.
NMS.	Northampton MS., in the John Clare Collection of Northampton Public Library.
PMS.	Peterborough MS., in Peterborough Museum.
LP	<i>The Later Poems of John Clare</i> , ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, Manchester, 1964.
Letters	<i>The Letters of John Clare</i> , ed. J. W. and Anne Tibble, 1951.
Life	J. W. and Anne Tibble, <i>John Clare: A Life</i> , revised edition, 1972.

- Life and Poetry* J. W. and Anne Tibble, *John Clare: His Life and Poetry*, 1956
- Poems* *The Poems of John Clare*, ed. J. W. Tibble, 1935.
- Poems of Madness* *Poems of John Clare's Madness*, ed. Geoffrey Grigson, 1949.
- Prose* *The Prose of John Clare*, ed. J. W. and Anne Tibble, 1951.
- Selected Poems* *John Clare, Selected Poems and Prose*, ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, 1967.
- Sketches* *Sketches in the Life of John Clare, written by Himself*, ed. Edmund Blunden, 1931.
- SC* *The Shepherd's Calendar*, ed. Eric Robinson and Geoffrey Summerfield, 1964.