



John Clare: A Biography

Jonathan Bate

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The long-awaited literary biography of the supreme "poets' poet"

John Clare (1793-1864) is the greatest labouring-class poet that England has ever produced. No one has ever written more powerfully of nature, of a rural childhood, and of the alienated and unstable self, but until now he has never been the subject of a comprehensive literary biography.

Here at last is his full story told by the light of his voluminous work: his birth in poverty, his work as an agricultural labourer, his burgeoning promise as a writer--cultivated under the gaze of rival patrons--then his moment of fame in the company of John Keats and the toast of literary London, and finally his decline into mental illness and his last years confined in asylums. Clare's ringing voice--quick-witted, passionate, vulnerable, courageous--emerges in generous quotation from his letters, journals, autobiographical writings, and his poems, as Jonathan Bate, the celebrated scholar of Shakespeare, brings the complex man, his beloved work, and his ribald world vividly to life.

Jonathan Bate is the author of *The Genius of Shakespeare* and *The Song of the Earth*. He is Leverhulme Research Professor of English Literature at the University of Warwick.

A Booklist Editors' Choice

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"[An] engrossing volume . . . Bate makes Clare's life as fascinating for us today as it was for Victorians, and his scholarship corrects the mistakes of earlier biographers without clogging the narrative. By surveying a broad selection of his subject's work, he sustains his contention that Clare ought to be considered a major poet. His unaffected diction, blessedly unencumbered by the ornate conventions of his time, sounds contemporary . . . In this groundbreaking biography and the judicious selection of poems [made by Bate] in *'Am'*, John Clare's voice carries across the centuries and speaks to us as freshly as the unspoiled nature he loved."—**Phoebe Pettingell**, *The New Leader*

"Splendid . . . It is Clare's love of his native countryside that comes through most powerfully in this volume . . . Thanks to Mr. Bate's biography, Clare will no longer be remembered as a mere madman or prodigy, but will be granted his rightful place in the canon as England's pre-eminent poet of nature."—**Amanda Kolson Hurley**, *The Washington Times*

"Perceptive."—**Adam Kirsch**, *Bookforum*

"Bate's thorough and lively [study] provides a more nuanced view both of Clare's psychological complexity as a person and of the possibilities for artistic and intellectual development available in the milieu of Clare's upbringing than has hitherto been available."—**Eric Gudas**, *The Bloomsbury Review*

"One of the challenges for [Clare's] biographer is to establish a living sense of the diverse realms he inhabited as agricultural worker, fashionable poet, foundering literary celebrity, and mental patient. Another is to trace the development of Clare's crystalline poetic vision, which unerringly focused and deepened itself while his beloved Northamptonshire landscape, his financial prospects, his literary status and even, at last, much of his personality, fell apart round him. Jonathan Bate's biography, the first full-scale life to appear since 1932, succeeds splendidly on both counts, not only making generous use of Clare's own wonderful prose and verse but adding historical perspective and a constant, intelligent probing . . . One of the strengths of *John Clare: A Biography* is its refusal to propose easy answers to any of the questions raised by Clare's life. Bate has an essayist's ability to walk around a problem, interrogating it from various sides . . . Clare's is an extraordinary story, both disturbing and inspiring. Jonathan Bate tells it in considerable detail and this is a big book, with a level of detail and intricacy of argument which demand stamina from the reader. But its seriousness, compassion, and lightness of touch make it highly readable."—**Grevel Lindop**, *The Times Literary Supplement*

"Fascinating . . . For more than a century, Clare has been hailed as a victim—of an uncultivated upbringing, of ignorant editors, of brutal doctors, even of the demon of poetry itself. The story of the divinely endowed poetic genius martyred by his gift is hard to resist, but Bate undertakes to dispel these notions, revealing the breadth of Clare's knowledge, the purposefulness of his writing style (he wouldn't take criticism, even from Keats), and his reliance on the generosity and intelligence of his editor, John Taylor. Bate's exploration of these myths is as compelling as his debunking of them. He richly describes the social and cultural life in 19th century England, specifically the presentation of Clare's 'peasant poet' persona, the political pressures Clare faced while receiving aid from wealthy aristocratic patrons, and the 19th century understanding and treatment of mental illness, which, to Clare's benefit, had recently undergone a transformation to a more humane form. Since his life seemed to beg for an explanation and his work espoused no ideology or agenda—merely the quiet appreciation of the natural world—Clare has been a kind of blank slate on which later generations project their own identities. Through scrupulous historical research, at times dizzying in its attention to detail, Bate avoids this pitfall, illuminating rather than obscuring Clare's personality and his poetry. His intimate and definitive account of Clare's life accomplishes more than most biographies could hope to: It gives us plenty of reasons to turn to the poet's verse."—**Jason Baskin**, *Newsday*

"An appropriately ample and properly judicious biography. It rises from a passionate conviction in Clare's genius, and spreads into a calm appraisal of his experience. But there's cleverness in this calm: Bate knows the sadness of Clare's story has led previous writers to make false claims, or to agitate the clear spirit of his writing with their own well-meant heat. His own tactic is to take nothing for granted, to stay as close as possible to Clare's own intentions, to resist the temptation to read all the poems as being strictly autobiographical, and to admit ignorance where ignorance exists . . . Bate wisely makes space for a thematic approach, winding chapters on (among other things) heredity, childhood, social environment, and friendship around the hard facts of birth, family, and so on. Far from making Clare seem vague, this has the good effect of allowing him to be in a kind of dream. It's a dream which combines elements of bliss—the

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