



two poems
by John Clare

a short appreciation
by Brian Lehman

TWO POEMS

by John Clare

from *The Shepherd's Calendar*

originally published in 1827

John Clare was one of the world's great explorers. His furthest wanderings were four trips to see his publishers in London, some 100 miles distant (and on one of these visits, by pure happenstance, to witness the funeral procession of Byron). He saw the sea once, 35 miles to the east in Lincolnshire.

Writing in the early 19th century from the village of Helpston, England, he explored without traveling. He peered into the immediate universe around him, seeing the world as a web of small, connected pieces. Often seeing it filtered through a warm gauze of a pint or three from the Blue Bell Inn, Clare, the ultimate *local*, was an odd outsider and curiosity to the other locals. This was not only because he read a lot but because he could read... and he wrote... a lot. He wrote on paper that was, perhaps strangely to us, a not common commodity. The backs of bills of sale, tree bark, scraps of wrapping could often serve the need. Debt and poverty were ever his companion so day jobs kept his touch to the dirt alert and kept his writing rich with a loamy sense of the real and the practical. With the vibrant desire of a quick-eyed lover, women, real and imagined, mused his writing. They were sometimes actual women and sometimes composition beings made up from of those he knew and those he passed in the street. On through his asylum years, many years that they were, the women drove him through his mindfields.

He mined word images from the natural world and from the people of farm and village, from insects and hayricks, bird's nest and apple tree, water patterns over rocks, mist-shrouded fens, and always with the Glinton Spire serving as a Pole Star to his wanderings and delvings into his pressurized vast small universe.

His poems are some of the most loving portraits of place ever written, but do not stoop to smarmy, insipid love, nor do they wallow in greeting card nostalgia by overlaying pictures of a place that never really was. The poems reflect a minute, high-relief detail and a keen, knowledgeable attention to the plant and animal life, lifting those details for a new kind of artistic inspection that anticipates William Carlos Williams. The images maintain an

edge of quiet inner despair over his own poverty, loves lost, and the social and political adjustments and displacement he saw as a result of the Enclosure Acts. His mental imbalances, the depression and alienation, festered to the point that he eventually believed himself to be Byron.

He is considered by 'experts' of the time to be addicted to writing; an opinion perhaps not far from fact. He continued to write through his asylum years and his *Journey out of Essex*, when he walked away from High Beach Asylum in Epping Forest the 80 miles back to Helpston, is an example of his power with prose as much as poetry in his descriptions of three and a half days of foot-weary loneliness, hunger, darkness, and cold.

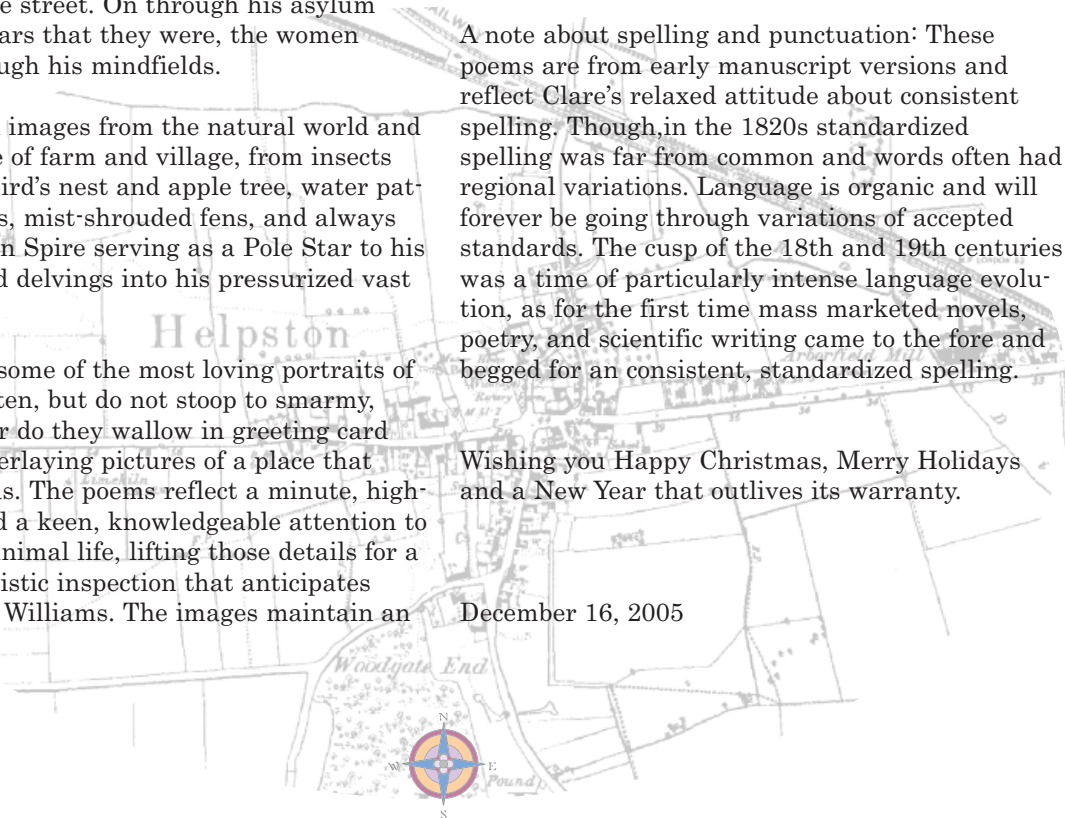
The poems are not allegorical nor metaphorical, but speak unslanted (with apologies to Emily D.) at a truth

His poems portray a surface of apparent parochialism, but with a heart of deeper understanding into politics and human frailty. *December* foreshadows a Dickensian mix of warmth that sits precariously over a quiet volcano of despair. And in *The Moors*, I wonder if Woody could have written *This Land is Your Land* had not Clare written it first.

A note about spelling and punctuation: These poems are from early manuscript versions and reflect Clare's relaxed attitude about consistent spelling. Though, in the 1820s standardized spelling was far from common and words often had regional variations. Language is organic and will forever be going through variations of accepted standards. The cusp of the 18th and 19th centuries was a time of particularly intense language evolution, as for the first time mass marketed novels, poetry, and scientific writing came to the fore and begged for an consistent, standardized spelling.

Wishing you Happy Christmas, Merry Holidays and a New Year that outlives its warranty.

December 16, 2005



December

Christmass is come and every hearth
Makes room to give him welcome now
Een want will dry its tears in mirth
And crown him wi a holly bough
Tho tramping neath a winters sky
Oer snow track paths and ryhmey stiles
The huswife sets her spinning bye
And bids him welcome wi her smiles
Each house is swept the day before
And windows stuck wi evergreens
The snow is beesomd from the door
And comfort crowns the cottage scenes
Gilt holly wi its thorny pricks
And yew and box wi berrys small
These deck the unusd candlesticks
And pictures hanging by the wall

Neighbours resume their anual cheer
Wishing wi smiles and spirits high
Clad christmass and a happy year
To every morning passer bye
Milk maids their christmass journeys go
Accompanyd wi favourd swain
And childern pace the crumping snow
To taste their grannys cake again

Hung wi the ivys veining bough
The ash trees round the cottage farm
Are often stript of branches now
The cotters christmass hearth to warm
He swings and twists his hazel band
And lops them off wi sharpend hook
And oft brings ivy in his hand
To decorate the chimney nook

Old winter whipes his ides bye
And warms his fingers till he smiles
Where cottage hearths are blazing high
And labour resteth from his toils
Wi merry mirth beguiling care
Old customs keeping wi the day
Friends meet their christmass cheer to share
And pass it in a harmless way

Old customs O I love the sound
However simple they may be
What ere wi time has sanction found
Is welcome and is dear to me
Pride grows above simplicity
And spurns it from her haughty mind
And soon the poets song will be
The only refuge they can find

The shepherd now no more afraid

Since custom doth the chance bestow
Starts up to kiss the giggling maid
Beneath the branch of mizzletoe
That neath each cottage beam is seen
Wi pearl-like-berrys shining gay
The shadow still of what hath been
Which fashion yearly fades away

And singers too a merry throng
At early morn wi simple skill
Yet imitate the angels song
And chant their christmass ditty still
And mid the storm that dies and swells
By fits-in humings softly steals
The music of the village bells
Ringing round their merry peals

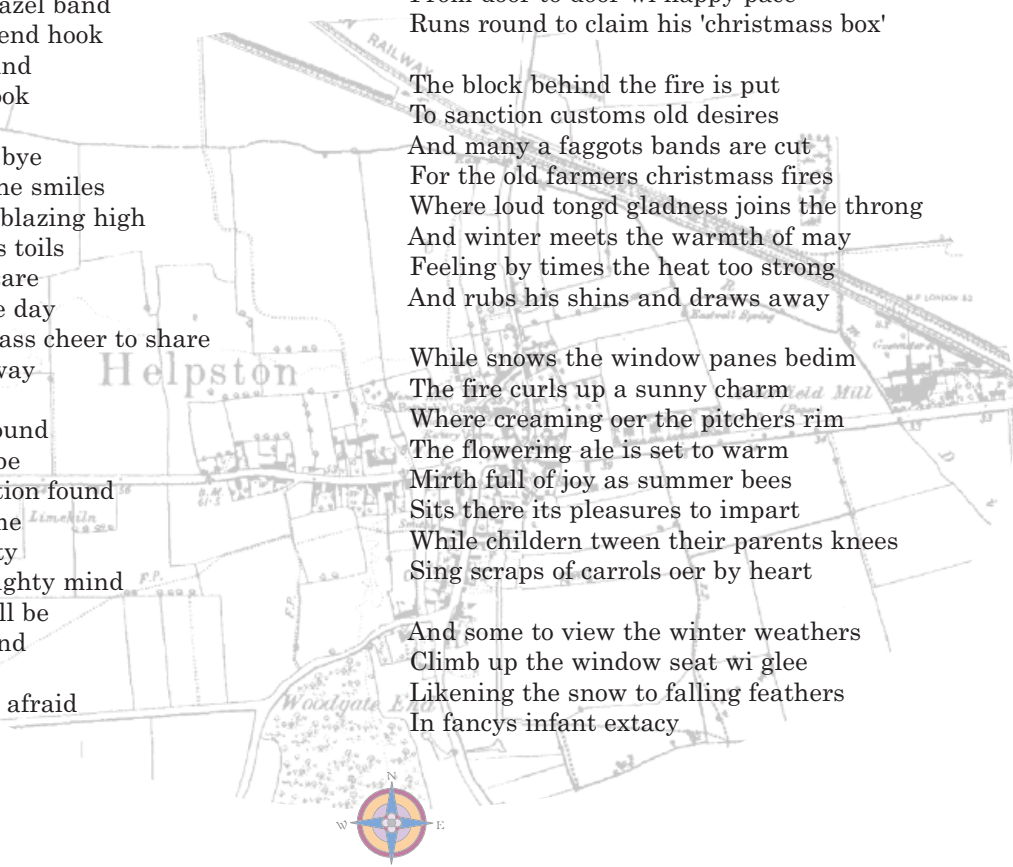
And when its past a merry crew
Bedeckt in masks and ribbons gay
The 'Morrice danse' their sports renew
And act their winter evening play
The clown-turnd-kings for penny praise
Storm wi the actors strut and swell
And harlequin a laugh to raise
Wears his hump back and tinkling bell

And oft for pence and spicy ale
Wi winter nosgays pind before
The wassail singer tells her tale
And drawls her christmass carols oer
The prentice boy wi ruddy face
And ryhme bepowderd dancing locks
From door to door wi happy pace
Runs round to claim his 'christmass box'

The block behind the fire is put
To sanction customs old desires
And many a faggots bands are cut
For the old farmers christmass fires
Where loud tongd gladness joins the throng
And winter meets the warmth of may
Feeling by times the heat too strong
And rubs his shins and draws away

While snows the window panes bedim
The fire curls up a sunny charm
Where creaming oer the pitchers rim
The flowering ale is set to warm
Mirth full of joy as summer bees
Sits there its pleasures to impart
While childern tween their parents knees
Sing scraps of carrols oer by heart

And some to view the winter weathers
Climb up the window seat wi glee
Likening the snow to falling feathers
In fancys infant extacy



Laughing wi superstitious love
Oer visions wild that youth supplies
Of people pulling geese above
And keeping christmass in the skyes

As tho the homstead trees were drest
In lieu of snow wi dancing leaves
As. tho the sundryd martins nest
Instead of ides hung the eaves
The childern hail the happy day
As if the snow was april grass
And pleasd as neath the warmth of may
Sport oer the water froze to glass

Thou day of happy sound and mirth
That long wi childish memory stays
How blest around the cottage hearth
I met thee in my boyish days
Harping wi raptures dreaming joys
On presents that thy coming found
The welcome sight of little toys
The christmass gifts of comers round

'The wooden horse wi arching head
Drawn upon wheels around the room
The gilded coach of ginger bread
And many colord sugar plumb
Gilt coverd books for pictures sought
Or storys childhood loves to tell
Wi many a urgent promise bought
To get tomorrows lesson well

And many a thing a minutes sport
Left broken on the sanded floor
When we woud leave our play and court
Our parents promises for more
Tho manhood bids such raptures dye
And throws such toys away as vain
Yet memory loves to turn her eye
And talk such pleasures oer again

Around the glowing hearth at night
The harmless laugh and winter tale
Goes round while parting friends delight
To toast each other oer their ale
The cotter oft wi quiet zeal
Will musing oer his bible lean
While in the dark the lovers steal
To kiss and toy behind the screen

The yule cake dotted thick wi plumbs
Is on each supper table found
And cats look up for falling crumbs
Which greedy childern litter round
And huswifes sage stuffd seasond chine
Long hung in chimney nook to drye
And boiling eldern berry wine
To drink the christmass eves 'good bye'



The Moors

Far spread the moorey ground a level scene
Bespread with rush and one eternal green
That never felt the rage of blundering plough
Though centurys wreathed spring's blossoms on its brow
Still meeting plains that stretched them far away
In uncheckt shadows of green brown, and grey
Unbounded freedom ruled the wandering scene
Nor fence of ownership crept in between
To hide the prospect of the following eye
Its only bondage was the circling sky
One mighty flat undwarfed by bush and tree
Spread its faint shadow of immensity
And lost itself, which seemed to eke its bounds
In the blue mist the horizon's edge surrounds
Now this sweet vision of my boyish hours
Free as spring clouds and wild as summer flowers
Is faded all - a hope that blossomed free,
And hath been once, no more shall ever be
Inclosure came and trampled on the grave
Of labour's rights and left the poor a slave
And memory's pride ere want to wealth did bow
Is both the shadow and the substance now
The sheep and cows were free to range as then
Where change might prompt nor felt the bonds of men
Cows went and came, with evening morn and night,
To the wild pasture as their common right
And sheep, unfolded with the rising sun
Heard the swains shout and felt their freedom won
Tracked the red fallow field and heath and plain
Then met the brook and drank and roamed again
The brook that dribbled on as clear as glass
Beneath the roots they hid among the grass
While the glad shepherd traced their tracks along
Free as the lark and happy as her song
But now all's fled and flats of many a dye
That seemed to lengthen with the following eye
Moors, loosing from the sight, far, smooth, and blea
Where swopt the plover in its pleasure free
Are vanished now with commons wild and gay
As poet's visions of life's early day
Mulberry-bushes where the boy would run
To fill his hands with fruit are grubbed and done
And hedgrow-briars - flower-lovers overjoyed
Came and got flower-pots - these are all destroyed
And sky-bound mores in mangled garbs are left
Like mighty giants of their limbs bereft
Fence now meets fence in owners' little bounds
Of field and meadow large as garden grounds
In little parcels little minds to please
With men and flocks imprisoned ill at ease
Each little path that led its pleasant way
As sweet as morning leading night astray
Where little flowers bloomed round a varied host
That travel felt delighted to be lost

Nor grudged the steps that he had ta-en as vain
When right roads traced his journeys and again -
Nay, on a broken tree he'd sit awhile
To see the mores and fields and meadows smile
Sometimes with cowslaps smothered - then all white
With daises - then the summer's splendid sight
Of cornfields crimson o'er the headache bloomd
Like splendid armys for the battle plumed
He gazed upon them with wild fancy's eye
As fallen landscapes from an evening sky
These paths are stopt - the rude philistine's thrall
Is laid upon them and destroyed them all
Each little tyrant with his little sign
Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine
But paths to freedom and to childhood dear
A board sticks up to notice 'no road here'
And on the tree with ivy overhung
The hated sign by vulgar taste is hung
As tho' the very birds should learn to know
When they go there they must no further go
Thus, with the poor, scared freedom bade goodbye
And much they feel it in the smothered sigh
And birds and trees and flowers without a name
All sighed when lawless law's enclosure came
And dreams of plunder in such rebel schemes
Have found too truly that they were but dreams.

