

**John Goodridge, *John Clare and Community*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. Pp. 252. £55. ISBN: 9780521887021.**

**Kirsty Blair and Mina Gorji, eds., *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750-1900*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. Pp. 216. £50. ISBN: 9781137030320.**

Clare is often championed for his lyric verse, so John Goodridge's argument for the poet's 'habitual commitment to the narrative mode' (162) in the second half of this monograph signals a shift in critical focus. The presentation of Clare as a storyteller in this book is closely connected to the central notion of community, which has also been the subject of recent critical work on Clare and other poets of labouring-class social origins.

Indeed, the presence of Robert Bloomfield (in terms of his influence on Clare and Clare's deep admiration for his poetry) in Goodridge's book is striking, and it is with reference to Bloomfield that the claim for 'the intense loneliness and the sociability of rural life in the era of enclosure' (86) is made in *John Clare and Community*, which, like a number of recent monographs on the poet, focuses mostly on work from his early and middle periods (c.1810-35). Goodridge says that he is approaching the subject in the spirit of the 'enthusiast' (8): in practice this means following a number of different directions (including 'counterfactual' ones (60)) in order to help us better understand Clare. The result is a study which is both accessible and scholarly, driven by the clarity of the writing. Goodridge offers a carefully balanced account of the 'isolated' and the 'sociable' Clare, claiming with considerable justification that if we try to pin him down to either one of these profiles we will end up going astray. The isolated Clare, for instance, felt cut-off from his rural neighbours due to his desire to enter 'the world of polite poetry' (170), while the sociable Clare, for example, had instant success with his first collection *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, resulting in dinner meetings in London with Coleridge, Hazlitt, and De Quincey.

Goodridge frequently employs an approach that he refers to as 'psycho-biographical' (14). In relation to Clare's reading of Thomas Chatterton, this helps us to see the latter as a kind of 'subversive' (34) model for some of the survival strategies which Clare tried to take up through his writing career – primarily as a way of dealing with the contradictory 'peasant poet' label (the one that appeared on the title page of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*). The argument in these sections of *John Clare and Community*, furthermore, is that rather than seeing Clare as having an awkward relationship with the eighteenth-century poetic tradition (as John Barrell and others have done), we should instead look at the examples of Chatterton, John Pomfret, John Cunningham, and Thomas Gray as fundamentally enabling for him. Chatterton (along with Bloomfield and Keats) was also named by Clare in an early 'tombstone drawing' (13). Understandably, Goodridge places a lot of emphasis on Clare's 'gravestone triumvirs' (60): the picture which emerges from these chapters is of Clare's fraternal attitude towards Bloomfield and Keats, neither of whom he actually met.

In the second half of the book Goodridge argues that Clare brings together popular, pastoral, and political discourses in his poems about enclosure, while Clare's poems on bird's nests are contextualised with reference to agricultural work practices, and this signals his difference from 'the familiar, aetherialising Romantic [poetic] formula' (144) of Shelley and Keats. In Chapter 7, the Clare-Keats connection is further developed through some insightful thematic and verbal parallels in 'St Martins Eve' and 'The Eve of St Agnes': one of the things that we see is that Clare's narrative lays bare the cruelty inherent in some rural customs and rituals.

The figure of ‘Granny Bains’ (in both Chapters 7 and 8) provides a welcome focal point for discussion of a female influence on Clare in terms of an ‘oral tradition of songs, ballads and stories’ (169). Clare, like Bloomfield, is ‘interested in the scene of storytelling as much as in the tale itself’ (172). The return to the comparison with Bloomfield helps to integrate the first half of the book with the second, and Goodridge contends that ‘Betrayal is [...] arguably Clare’s greatest theme’ (161): betrayal in terms of social and political issues such as enclosure, but also betrayal in love. As these ideas indicate, *John Clare and Community* is a compelling study: the book will advance considerably our understanding of Clare’s narrative modes and his relationship to the eighteenth-century poetic tradition.

Goodridge’s essay on Clare and Bloomfield is one of two chapters on the former poet in *Class and the Canon: Constructing Labouring-Class Poetry and Poetics, 1750-1900*, which has its origins in a highly enjoyable conference held at the University of Glasgow in 2008. In her Introduction to the volume, Kirsty Blair offers a lucid summary of new developments in this burgeoning area of scholarship, while she also provides an outline of key problems and issues that are beginning to be tackled in the critical field. Blair begins by attending to the potential inadequacy of the label ‘labouring class’, pointing out that there is something of a trap ahead if we try to think of the label as conveniently pigeonholing writers based on their economic and social circumstances. There is, for instance, an essay in this collection by Matthew Campbell on Samuel Ferguson, a barrister and antiquarian. With reference to the example of the poet James Bird (1-2), Blair points out that he was very self-conscious about being considered to be a ‘labouring-class poet’. One of the main themes running through the essays in the collection, then, is that the poets under discussion were acutely aware of the terms in which they were constructed and (frequently) marketed for middle- or upper-class readerships – even if, as Blair acknowledges, the idea of the ‘labouring-class tradition’ has partly been a product of twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism.

What also emerges from these essays, as the title of the collection indicates, is that the poets (and prose writers) in this volume draw on canonical literature (Shelley and Byron being two key examples here) in innovative kinds of ways. To this end, a number of the essays focus on labouring-class writers ‘and their importance in the literary cultures of their time’ (3). Still, as the contributors are aware, the label ‘labouring class’ remains a ‘tricky’ (3) one, and Nigel Leask, in the first essay in the collection, examines whether or not Robert Burns was a labouring-class poet. This examination involves a discussion of ‘class’ itself and no less difficult terms such as ‘plebeian’ and ‘peasant’. To summarise a careful and complex argument, it seems that while Burns served as inspiration for English writers such as Bloomfield, Clare, and – later in the nineteenth century – dialect poets such as Edwin Waugh (the subject of Brian Hollingworth’s essay in this collection), ultimately, Burns can be described as ‘a labouring poet, if not a labouring-class poet’ (27).

Burns is also cited in Mina Gorji’s essay on Clare, where the metaphors of enclosure and concealment and detailed attention to the poet’s particular word choices are used to argue for his ‘poetics of littleness’ (79). In the next essay, Kerri Andrews analyses how the theme of time (and its relationship to memory and remembering) connects Ann Yearsley with William Cowper and William Wordsworth. Yearsley’s poetry, it is argued, is a ‘crucial bridge’ between late eighteenth-century and Romantic writers (114). Indeed, the idea of a bridge between different cultures and traditions informs Jennifer’s Orr’s contention that the late eighteenth-century poet Samuel Thomson ‘maintained a tension between his bardic representation of lower-class regional life and a desire to associate with men of more intellectual predilections’ (37). Orr’s outline of a ‘bardic’ tradition dovetails with Michael Sanders’ focus on the Chartist theorising of poetry as “‘prophetic or bardic’” (162): Romantic poets such as Shelley and Byron ‘exemplify the former’, while most labouring-class poets are

viewed in terms of the latter category. Indeed, in an earlier chapter in the collection, Marcus Waithe takes up the issues of labour and writing in regard to Thomas Carlyle and Ebenezer Elliott. In an essay on William Barnes, Sue Edney points out that self-taught and working-class poetry is difficult to situate within ‘theoretical frameworks’ (194): this issue is connected to the question of aesthetic quality, and while there is still much work to be done on aesthetic and canonical valuations in relation to labouring-class poetry, *Class and the Canon* offers much analysis beyond the biographical approaches which have so far tended to dominate this critical field.

*Adam White*  
*University of Manchester*