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0521020891 - John Clare in Context

Edited by Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips and Geoffrey Summerfield

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This is the first collection of modern critical essays on the work of John Clare, a writer who, despite a long history of marginalisation and neglect, is coming to be seen as one of the most important English poets of the nineteenth century. Taken together, these new essays constitute a reassessment of a great writer of rural England who has as yet found no place within the existing Romantic and Victorian canon. By contextualising his work in relation to poetic tradition, Romantic literature, criticism, politics, natural history and contemporary science, they show the ways in which his charged vernacular poetry radically contests dominant notions of culture, poetry and knowledge. Contributors include distinguished Clare scholars Mark Storey and Kelsey Thornton, the literary critic John Lucas, the historian of madness Roy Porter, and the Irish poet Seamus Heaney who, in an important essay, looks at Clare from the perspective of post-colonial poetry today. In the wake of his bi-centenary this volume represents a landmark in the history of Clare's reception and a valuable resource for all students of his poetry.

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Preface

This volume was originally planned by the distinguished Clare scholar Geoffrey Summerfield as a bi-centenary celebration of the relatively neglected English Romantic poet John Clare.

Modern Clare scholarship might be said to date from 1961 when Geoffrey Summerfield first began transcribing the Clare manuscripts at Northampton Library and invited Eric Robinson to join him on the principle that, as he said, ‘the undertaking did indeed require two pairs of eyes’. This resulted in their joint editions of *Later Poems of John Clare* (Manchester University Press, 1964), *John Clare: The Shepherd's Calendar* (Oxford University Press, 1964) and *Clare: Selected Poems and Prose* (Oxford University Press, 1966). After completing his superbly accessible and idiosyncratic *John Clare, Selected Poetry* (Penguin, 1990), Geoffrey envisaged this bi-centenary collection of new essays on Clare as something of a companion volume, an attempt to open up Clare to a wider and not wholly academic audience. Having commissioned the essays in the present volume, Geoffrey sadly and unexpectedly died in February 1991 before he could bring the volume to completion. At the suggestion of his widow, Judith Summerfield, we took over the final co-ordinating and editing of the book. We hope it is substantially the book he had planned and it is now dedicated to his memory.

Hugh Haughton, Adam Phillips

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