ROMANTICISM

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Rebels and Mutineers

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45. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1797-1837* (London, 1996), 111.

46. See Michael Watts, *The Dissenters: From the Reformation to the French Revolution* (Oxford, 1985), 111.

NEIL RAMSEY

'Making My Self a Soldier': The Role of Soldiering in the Autobiographical Work of John Clare

Recent discussions about the context of John Clare's writing have tended to focus on his relationship to a longer tradition of labouring-class poetry and questions of whether he can be rightly deemed a 'peasant' poet.¹ Whilst the debate surrounding his relation to this literary tradition has elucidated much about his poetry, it has meant that less attention has been paid to other kinds of labouring-class writing as influences on his work. One context in particular that has remained unexplored is the fact that Clare's poetry was published contemporaneously with a significant body of autobiographical writing by labouring-class soldiers. Not only does Clare's own autobiographical writing demonstrate a marked degree of interest in soldiering, but so too, there were remarkable similarities in the reception of Clare's poetry and this soldiers' writing. In order, therefore, to understand Clare's relation to a wider body of labouring-class writing in the period we need to take account of the important role that soldiering played in his work and his relationship to autobiographical writing by soldiers more generally.

Given that, until recently, studies of the Romantic period have generally neglected to examine the cultural influence of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars in Britain, it is not surprising that little attention has been paid to the idea of soldiering in John Clare's

life, poetry or autobiographical works.² His biographers have largely ignored his interest in soldiering and have habitually failed to provide anything more than a cursory overview of the time he spent in his local militia towards the end of the Napoleonic Wars. They have also declined to examine the connection between soldiering and his earliest developments as a poet.³ Meanwhile, there has been little commentary about war, battles or soldiering in criticism of Clare's poetry, despite the fact that he wrote a number of poems on these subjects.

However, a close reading of Clare's autobiographical works shows that soldiering played an important role in his imaginative life and is intimately bound up with the ways in which he accounted for his early development towards writing poetry. Clare repeatedly romanticized the idea of soldiering, allowing it to operate as an imaginative space into which he could project visions of an alternative identity. Soldiering ultimately functioned for him, when he joined the militia, as a site within which he would test his sense of being a man and a writer. In this respect, Clare's self-representation as a soldier paralleled that of other soldier memoirists whose work appeared in the years following the Napoleonic Wars. Such autobiographies offered labouring-class men the opportunity to create stories about identities that lay outside of their class status.

Soldiering had not, traditionally, been highly

regarded in Georgian society. Although military victories were widely celebrated, the army itself was commonly viewed as a tool of state oppression and soldiers were held in some contempt as petty criminals or licentious drunkards.⁴ Typically, only those men who were otherwise unable to find employment became soldiers; as the military historian Michael Glover has noted, 'conditions in the ranks were so deplorable that only "the very worst members of society" could be persuaded to volunteer'.⁵ Though officers in the army originated from much wealthier backgrounds, and were regarded by the army and society more generally as gentlemen, the rank and file of the army had little social status. They were paid a minimal wage and were subjected to a disciplinary regime that many contemporaries considered unduly brutal. J.E. Cookson suggests that the soldier was regarded as an outcast from society who had 'relinquished the freedoms of civilian existence for slavery, exile, and (very likely) horrible death'.⁶

The French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars are commonly viewed, however, as leading to a much greater popular involvement in the political life and defence of the nation.⁷ The threat of invasion by the French particularly meant that the auxiliary armed forces in Britain were greatly expanded during the war years and the government undertook the establishment of volunteer units and a local militia to supplement the existing regular militia.⁸ Large numbers would come to serve in these forces during the course of the wars, and it has been estimated that as many as one in five men of military age in Britain were involved in the armed forces in some capacity.⁹ Whilst such large involvement has been seen as indicating widespread loyalist sentiment, there may well have been a range of motivating factors and service in the armed forces was apparently welcomed by many simply because it allowed them an opportunity to dress and act like soldiers.¹⁰

As much as soldiering was considered brutal it equally contained elements that were theatrical and even playful.¹¹ The army utilized elaborate spectacle in its self-presentation, and it has been remarked that uniforms and martial music constituted 'an essential component of military management in the British army' and were considered vital for attracting recruits.¹² The theatricality of soldiering was even more pronounced in Britain's militia and volunteer forces. Offering their services as free citizens, soldiers in these forces demanded to be treated with a dignity and respect that was felt to be absent in the army's treatment of regular soldiers (*The French Are Coming*, 140). They were thus far less alienated from the civilian population, and their own civilian identities, than regular soldiers. The sense of exile with which the regular soldier was associated could here be translated into an opportunity to theatrically play out an alternative identity, and it was widely felt that service in these forces was as much a source of amusement for those involved as it was directly useful to the defence of Britain. The Earl Fitzwilliam was aware that volunteer units had the potential to transform soldiering into 'play time, and arms play things',¹³ whilst the Earl of Selkirk similarly concluded that the local militia simply provided the men involved with 'a scene of animated recreation'.¹⁴

Throughout his autobiographical works soldiering is, for Clare, linked with a ludic theatricality in which he can play out and create stories about new identities. Clare notes that for children to play at soldiers they would seek out ways of adapting their dress, and he tells us that as a child he and his friends would search for 'red and blue flowers' to make soldiers' cockades for their hats.¹⁵ He relates too, that as an adult he would habitually romanticize escaping into the army in order to evade the disjunction that he felt between himself and those around him, noting for instance that his body was 'young and feeble

and like my mind strange and unfit with the world' (77). He views soldiering as being inherently linked to the adoption of a new appearance and he identifies it with his desire to play out an alternative identity. Clare imagines the army as a place outside his quotidian world, wherein he could be 'at peace among strangers' (107).

If Clare's poetry is considered to draw strength from what Mark Storey describes as his life-long 'uncertainty as to his identity and "place"', it is notable that his earliest efforts at storytelling, before he even begins to write poems, are hinged on romantic ideas of becoming a soldier.¹⁶ He tells us in his early autobiographical writing in his *Sketches* that his first stories are 'romantic wanderings of Sailors, Soldiers etc following them step by step from their starting out to their return, for I always loved to see a tale end happy' (9). In his later autobiographical fragments he expanded on this idea. Noting that his first stories came when he worked as a servant to Francis Gregory and had to travel to the town of Maxey to fetch flour, he describes how he had to pass haunted spots that terrified him and so he 'used to employ my mind as well as I was able to put them out of my head so I used to imagine tales and mutter them over as I went on making my self the hero sometimes making my self a soldier and tracing the valours [of] history onwards thro various successes till I became a great man' (73). Soldiering functioned for Clare as a romantic idea of escape and transformation. It was implicitly bound up with the exercise of his imagination, offering a space into which he could project stories about the transformative potential of this new identity.

These romantic notions of escape are, however, replete with a sense of his fear of soldiering. He contemplates, for instance, joining the 'Nottinghamshire Militia' because it 'had not the terror haunting name of a regular soldier' (77) and he later contemplates joining the artillery but declines due to his uncertainty

and fears of separation from those around him, stating 'my variety of minds prevented me besides my love matters etc was a strong tether that I could not easily break' (107). Clare's fears highlight his awareness that whilst soldiering could be romanticized, it was also fraught with danger and meant losing contact with his civilian identity. His parents were equally concerned that he was unable to settle into a job simply because he seemed congenitally unsuited to working, and Clare reports that at one point they 'gave up all hopes of doing any good with me and fancied that I should make nothing but a soldier' (66). His parents' views echo his sense that the soldier is clearly outside of their own immediate world, and their association of soldiering with shameful failure and exile further serves to counterpoint and highlight Clare's romanticization of the military. When he leaves his parents to join the local militia in his neighbouring town of Oundle, he reports that the mothers of the departing soldiers treated them as though they were 'going to Botany Bay' (94), suggesting something of this complex of terrifying separation, shame and exotic foreignness associated with military service.

Given Clare's sense of soldiering, how does he write about it in relation to the time he actually spent in his local militia? His entry into the militia was certainly a reluctant one. He volunteered for service, but only because he was concerned that he might otherwise have been forced into service through the militia's ballot system and would therefore have been denied the bounty money that was granted to soldiers who volunteered (94). Rather than regarding his time as a soldier as a romanticized transformation of the self, Clare represents his military experience primarily in terms of the subordination of the soldier to the exercise of authority and power. Because Clare served in the militia, however, this was complicated by the fact that he and the men in authority above him still retained their civilian identities. Just as

Clare was aware in his thinking about soldiers that service in the militia was less terrifying, less dislocating from his civilian life than service as a regular soldier, so he is aware that those soldiers around him in the militia were not proper soldiers. The idea of the proper soldier, what Clare figures as the regular soldier, or as the soldier of 'valour' that he elsewhere wonders if he could ever be (94), serves for him as an imaginary yet privileged masculine identity against which to judge the authority of those in the militia.

Within this authoritarian structure, Clare discovers that he is unable to perform properly as a soldier. If he had romantically imagined transforming himself by joining the army, he now discovers himself to be too awkward for this role, recognizing for instance that he was 'not clean enough for a soldier' (95). Where he had romanticized the company of strangers he now simply sees a 'motly multitude of lawless fellows' (94). Moreover, he has difficulty hearing the words of command delivered by the militia corporal for performing drills because, as he notes, 'I then was a rhymist' (95) and is preoccupied composing poems in his head when the drill instructions are called out. His self-confessed identity as a poet, a 'rhymist', comes directly into conflict with his attempt to enact the part of the soldier.

Significantly, Clare is abused and 'terribly teased' (95) by the corporal due to this conflict between his rhyming and his inability to carry out the drill correctly. Clare particularly resents this show of authority from the corporal because he views him as only pretending to be a soldier, describing the corporal as acting 'as if he had been a soldier all his life' (95). He thus posits a distinction between his idea of the regular soldier and the militia corporal's imposture of this role. Clare had considered evading the corporal's abuse by deserting, but is fearful of being laughed at by his comrades. Conscious therefore of his own masculine honour, he eventually resists the corporal's

abuse physically, telling us that, 'I could stand it no longer but threw my gun aside and seized him by the throat I twisted him down and kicked him when he was down' (95). Clare abandons his musket, thereby relinquishing a potent symbol of soldierhood and its authoritarian structures, and resists the corporal simply on their relative physical strength as men, noting that 'he was much less in strength than I was' (95). Clare's resort to physicality is an attempt to assert his own identity, as a man and a 'rhymist', against the authority of the corporal. He dismisses the corporal's authority as lacking authenticity, and acknowledges their relative equality on the basis of their status simply as men.

This tension between his sense of the regular soldier and the militia authorities occurs again when Clare relates an anecdote about the militia officers. Clare mocks the pretence of the officers, noting that they were 'often talking about Bounaparte in the field and p[er]forming each other in a very ridiculous manner very often' (96). He tells a story of how the officers had attempted to prevent their soldiers from plundering the local orchards at night by making them rise early, in the hope that they would be too tired to go out stealing at night. Being ploughmen, however, the soldiers were untroubled by the early mornings and so the officers only inconvenienced themselves. This joke on the officers' masculine and class honour is compounded when, on one of these early mornings, an officer's wife, fearing that her husband might catch cold, sent her maid out to take her husband breakfast. Clare ironically describes the officer as gallantly declining the food whilst his fellow officers 'hastened up to congratulate his valour and shake hands with him as a brother worthy the name of a soldier' (97). Though the officers have authority and class privilege, Clare again deploys an idealized view of the soldier to demonstrate that they are no better than he or his ploughmen companions. He shows that despite their

privileged class position, they possess no more 'valour' or masculinity than he does.

If the soldier's experience in the early nineteenth-century is described as a 'continuously theatricalized encounter with authority' (*Theatres of War*, 20), what Clare describes as the officers merely 'showing authority' (95), then the encounter between Clare and the officers seems to suggest a different kind of theatricality, one in which those with authority are no longer in charge of the performance. The anecdotal humour in Clare's account, humour that he had shared with the other ploughmen, is directed against the officers in a kind of carnivalesque inversion of power relations. Despite their efforts to act out the gallantry of the regular soldier, in their theatrical manner of dismissing the maid, they are acting merely serves to show how far they are from someone 'worthy the name of a soldier' (97). Clare is thus evaluating the officers against this idealised version of the soldier, using an idea of masculinity, or 'valour', inherent in the soldier to reflect back on the relative masculinity of the ploughmen and the officers. The ploughmen emerge as closer to Clare's ideal, their masculinity and worth thus being privileged over their class identity.

Notably too, Clare not only recorded these events in his autobiography but also composed a ballad about the incident. This ballad is important because it is the first poetic work that he tells us he attempted to have published. Jonathan Bate has recently dated this event to 1812, which means that Clare tried to have this work published eight years before his first collection of poems was finally published, and two years before he even purchased a book in which to begin properly preserving his poems.¹⁷ Thus, we get a very early glimpse of how Clare conceives of publishing his poetry: the ballad is, like boxing and kicking the corporal, a way for him to challenge the implied authority of the class structures in which he finds himself (though without resorting to violence, which

ultimately separates him from his militia companions when they protest his treatment of the corporal). Clare's earliest effort to have his work published can be read as an assertion of his own status as a man and poet against the constraints of his class identity.

But just as the militia punishes Clare for boxing the corporal, so he is refused publication of his ballad because, as the man at the printing office observes, 'it was too personal to print' (97).¹⁸ If the officers had recognized themselves in the work they may well have taken disciplinary action against Clare or libellous action against his publisher.¹⁹ Though Clare can challenge their class status, their authority and capacity to punish and silence him remains firmly in place. Clare thus seems acutely aware of the potential and danger of writing, and even though the piece is never published he still remarks that 'I felt fearful of being found out so I quickly destroyed it tearing it into very small pieces as I went along' (97). He can and does use his writing to challenge class structures, yet as his later career as a writer would demonstrate, he would remain firmly bound by those structures.

William Cowper had written in *The Task* that service in the militia radically changed the humble peasant. He claimed that on experiencing life as a soldier, the peasant 'Grows conscious of a change, and likes it well' and that 'his three years of heroship expired, I Returns indignant to the slighted plough'.²⁰ But even though Clare contemplates the transformative power of soldiering, he is not himself left transformed by his experience in the militia.²¹ Rather, he uses his experiences to probe the authority that is presented by the militia and to assert his own identity, in terms of his class, masculinity and his self-definition as a poet, in relation to that authority. For Clare, the idea of the soldier served not only as a means of imagining the possibility of escaping from his identity as a labourer or peasant. Equally, it served as a way of

challenging class structures, figuring as an imaginary space wherein ideas about one's inherent masculinity could prevail over the assumed authority of those class structures. His inability to ever adopt this idealized masculine identity of the soldier parallels his own failure to successfully adopt the identity of the poet and so evade his peasant background. As a writer though, he was clearly capable of analysing the power relations in which he found himself, utilizing his writing to implicitly challenge those relations and assert his own worth.

If soldiering played a role in Clare's development as a poet, it is significant that one of the most important impacts of the French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars on British culture has been identified by Betty T. Bennett as the emergence of a significant body of war poetry that highlighted the efforts of the common soldier in the defence of the nation. She insists that with this literature men of the labouring-classes emerged, 'for the first time in British history', as a central focus of interest for writers, resulting in an 'extensive body of verse which deals compassionately and sympathetically with the common man'.²²

In the aftermath of the wars, however, the common soldier would emerge as more than simply a subject of interest. Numbers of soldiers would, equally, emerge as authors in their own right, and at the same time that Clare was writing his autobiographical fragments there were appearing in Britain numerous memoirs and autobiographies written by the country's soldiers.²³ Though officers and generals would also come to write about their experiences in the wars, it was ordinary soldiers, men of the rank and file who had fought with Britain's regular army on foreign campaigns, who first published these memoirs. These texts would, to some extent, reflect Clare's experience of soldiering, with its hardships, isolation and cruelty. Robert Butler, for instance lamented much like Clare that

service in the militia had taught him the "inconveniences of a soldier's life", with its cramped barracks and severe field days.²⁴ But accounts of service in the militia were comparatively rare.²⁵ It was through their active, overseas service that these soldiers had principally become legitimated to write of their experiences, and alongside accounts of hardship they would write of their experiences serving in victorious British battles and travelling across exotic foreign locations. Through their memoirs, these soldiers would lay a personal claim to the very imaginative fantasies of valorous soldiering that Clare had projected himself into as he first started creating stories.

One soldier's work in particular was to achieve considerable success and fame, and would, like Clare's poetry, excite, 'no small portion of public attention and applause'.²⁶ The *Journal of a Soldier of the Seventy-First, or Glasgow Regiment Highland Light Infantry*, from 1806 to 1815 was published anonymously (simply under the name Thomas) in 1819 and was one of the first of these soldiers' memoirs to appear. The work went on to sell over 3000 copies before being published in a third edition in 1822, thus clearly rivaling sales of Clare's poetry over the same period.²⁷ Just as Clare longed for fame as a poet, Thomas tells us at the start of his work that he had aspired to become an actor in the theatre and so secure for himself fame and a 'deathless name'.²⁸ Unable to achieve his ambition, Thomas entered the army and campaigned in South America and Europe as a soldier for nearly nine years. Returning home to Britain, Thomas was discovered by his future editor, John Howell, in a state of indigence. Howell describes how he took pity on Thomas and, acknowledging that he had served his country without due recognition, urged him to write of his experiences as a means of alleviating his poverty.²⁹ A failed actor, a figure who had turned from being the 'writer' his father had hoped he would become and who had entered

the army where he is mocked by the other soldiers for even reading a book, becoming a soldier is the very thing that enables Thomas to emerge as an author (*Journal of a Soldier*, 1828, 21).

As authors, soldiers such as Thomas were framed for the public in remarkably similar ways to Clare. Often discovered in a state of poverty, they were cast by their editors as objects deserving of pity and charity, and were lauded for the natural genius of their plain language and observant minds. Their work was valued not only because they related events that were, like Clare's poetry, 'pleasing and instructing',³⁰ but equally they were celebrated because they provided authentic, simple, and unadulterated observations. James Downing's editor, for instance, drew attention to the fact that Downing's memoirs were 'founded on facts and experience' during his time as a soldier in the 20th Regiment of foot, and that they were composed with 'the sincerest regard to virtue and truth'.³¹ In much the same way Clare's editor for *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery*, John Taylor, endeavoured to demonstrate the authority of Clare's rural poetry by drawing attention to the authenticity of his poverty.³² An anonymous reviewer in the *Monthly Review* similarly felt the volume was deserving of esteem on the basis of its providing 'faithful representations of rural life and scenery'.³³ The reviewer notably suggested that it was valuable to have such authentic experience when composing pastorals or writing about battles, such authenticity was a valuable corrective to the 'effusions of a poet writing pastorals as he wanders through the fields to the north-east of London, or describing a battle after having seen a Review in Hyde Park' (*Critical Heritage*, 74).

It was the authenticity of these men's writing that was regarded as valuable; they provided unmediated, untutored feelings and reflections, in which their very lack of literary ability could be read as its strength. Clare and

these soldier authors were valued precisely because they produced 'artless and unsophisticated' writing (*Critical Heritage*, 74). In 1822, Thomas Rees's anonymous female editor insisted that she 'has ever strongly reprobated the folly and cruelty of encouraging any of the lower classes in life to aspire to the rank of authors' but that:

when the germ of real genius appears, it becomes our duty, as it ought to be our pride, to protect and encourage it to maturity. Had this not been done, how would Scotland have boasted of her Burns, or England of her Bloomfield and her Clare? Not that it is intended to insinuate that our present author could rank with characters so distinguished as those; yet none who peruse his journal can deny that he possessed a mind formed for observation, and good natural abilities.³⁴

Notably, although his editor insisted that he was not a genius of the same mould as Clare, a writer such as Rees was nonetheless linked with Clare because both men provided unsophisticated observation of their experiences and wrote with a 'natural' ability.

David Vincent has remarked in his study of nineteenth-century working class autobiography, *Bread, Knowledge, and Freedom*, that these soldiers' memoirs represented one of the first ways in which men from labouring-class backgrounds in Britain began to tell their stories as 'self-conscious participants' in the history of the nation.³⁵ Vincent goes on to suggest, however, that such memoirs related little about working men's experience of the period because they simply documented the events of military campaigns and provided patriotic stories intended for a middle-class audience (*Bread, Knowledge and Freedom*, 26-7). Clare too was severely constrained in his writing by his class condition. Numerous reviewers argued that Clare's writing had to be principally evaluated

according to the social status of its author, and that 'to maintain that they have the smallest pretensions to comparative excellence with the writings of others out of his own sphere, would be ridiculous and unjust'.³⁶ Another reviewer concurred that the real value of his work were simply the remarkable 'circumstances of the writer'.³⁷ Much of the conservative reception of his work saw its value in his humble '[r]esignation' to his poverty.³⁸

Yet these stories of soldiering are, as Clare's experiences in the militia might indicate, potentially much more unsettling to the class structures of post-war Britain than Vincent suggests. Linda Colley has argued that the massive involvement of labouring-class men in the armed forces during the wars was potentially subversive because it stressed the civic obligation of armed service, an obligation that could lead to demands for the vote.³⁹ These soldiers may have displayed patriotism in their stories, but their patriotism in itself could be a threat to established class structures.

William Cobbett evoked such sentiments when he developed his *Grammar of the English Language* (1819), which he claimed was written to give 'practical effect to the natural genius found in the Soldier, the Sailor ... and to make that genius a perennial source of wealth, strength and safety to the kingdom'.⁴⁰ Cobbett's sentiments parallel those of Ree's editors, that encouraging and bringing to public attention the untutored genius of these soldiers could itself be a patriotic act. In a similar way, the publication of Clare's poetry could also be seen as having a public importance, rescuing from possible oblivion work that could be seen to provide the 'unwritten language of England'.⁴¹ But Cobbett is deliberately using ideas about the writing soldier as a provocation; he is echoing the unsettling associations between soldiers and writing that had held currency since the eighteenth century. Officers were typically concerned that literate soldiers might write petitions and challenge the authority of

their commanding officers; Captain Plume in George Farquhar's play, *The Recruiting Officer*, declared, for instance, that he would have no soldiers who could write or read in his regiment.⁴² Cobbett himself had pressed charges against his officers after completing service in the British army.⁴³

Indeed, however much they may have celebrated British military achievements, much of the material in the soldiers' memoirs was a challenge to official government rhetoric. Often displaying a surprising lack of deference to military institutions and their superiors, these soldiers typically equated military service with suffering and cruelty. John Howell asserted that the *Journal of a Soldier* had been published precisely to provide a 'correct view' of the 'exhausting toils and privations to which the soldier is exposed' (*Journal of a Soldier*, 1822, vi), whilst the soldier Joseph Donaldson observed in his memoirs that the army was well placed to 'to make a man an abject slave' and he repeatedly commented on the conduct of his officers and their 'vexatious and overbearing tyranny' over the soldiers.⁴⁴

Reflecting Clare's similar confrontation with military authority, these soldier's voices carried echoes of the revived radicalism of the late war years in which 'military-related issues', such as the treatment of soldiers, had been a focal point for dissenting opinion (*Theatres of War*, 13). *The London Magazine* detected subversively anti-hierarchical sentiment in Donaldson's memoirs, whilst John Lockhart's attack on autobiographical writing in the *Quarterly Review*, one of the few sustained commentaries on autobiographical writing in the period, was in part an attack on works being written by soldiers and sailors; works that he located alongside pickpockets and mob-orators.⁴⁵ Lockhart hoped that patriotic autobiography might emerge instead of such writing, but equally, commentators like Cobbett were also hoping for patriotic autobiographical writing. It could constitute a different kind of

patriotism, however – one in which the soldiers would make their own claims to an involvement with the nation as legitimated subjects.

Clare's poetry itself draws attention to the involvement of soldiers in the life of the nation. In celebrating the victory of Waterloo, Clare insists that it is not simply the British commander, the Duke of Wellington, or the nation as whole that should be celebrated. Rather, he calls for Britain's poets to sing the praises of the British soldiers, and insists: British courage bold & true

Fir'd the noble army through
Gen'ral's Privates all as one
Each at heart a Wellin[g]ton
Heroes hail – accept your due
Glory – fame, – & Waterloo!⁴⁶

Soldiering could link these men to the nation in a fantasy of glory and fame that elides class differences. They have all become equated with the heroic honour that is recognized as lying with Wellington, but which is here translated into a wider 'British courage'.

Elsewhere, his poetry registers the exotic yet traumatic transformation that marks soldiering, wherein those who become soldiers are haunted by the social dislocations that it engenders. Frequently he depicts the soldier returning disabled from foreign locations or he shows how their transformation into a soldier radically separates them from their loved ones. In 'Rosey Lane' the returning soldier 'was so altered sin his parting day | He hardly knew his mother now' (*Early Poems*, ii, 223), and even the sheep and cows are startled by his strange and unsettling appearance. In poems such as 'The Poor Soldier' and 'The Disabled Soldier' he describes soldiers who return home to England disfigured by scars and wounds and left burdened with their 'tales of long sorrow' (*Early Poems*, ii, 396).

But for Clare, these soldiers return ennobled from their military service and with pressing claims upon the reader's charity for having

served the country. The soldier narrator in his 'The Poor Soldier' exclaims that despite his sufferings 'I've beat the rude storm & I've fought wi' the brave | I've stood where the valiant have fell' and he asks of the reader 'In pity don't turn me away from your door' (*Early Poems*, ii, 396). In 'The Wounded Soldier' the soldier appears as a 'pious object' who relates a 'woful tale' of his experiences (*Early Poems*, i, 91), but Clare urges us to recognize the soldier's service. His eponymous soldier declares that 'I've fought my country's freedom to maintain' even while he notes that his wealthy countrymen 'deem my sorrows far beneath their pride' (*Early Poems*, i, 92–3). Clare's poems register a sense of the patriotic and romantic manliness that inheres in the soldier but they provide a politically unsettling recognition of such manliness. His vision of soldiering suggests that it has the capacity to disrupt class differences and he writes with an acute awareness of the consequences of a 'cruel War' in the broken bodies of these soldiers (*Early Poems*, i, 91).

Taken together, the soldiers' memoirs of the immediate post-war period can be seen to constitute what Clive Emsley has described as a growing 'self-awareness and self-confidence' of the labouring-classes, that 'the ex-soldiers and ex-sailors who wrote memoirs believed that their stories were worth telling, and the printers recognized that there was a market for the adventures of such humble men'.⁴⁷ Carolyn Stedman has similarly noted that 'the soldier's tale is one of the few that poor and unimportant men have been allowed to tell during our recent history – allowed in the sense of audience expectation and audience desire; allowed in the sense that the story of work, or of labour (the narrative of a working life) is denied the structure of romance that the soldier's story works within'.⁴⁸ As Clare's parents' remarks indicate (when they suggest that Clare might be useless for anything but being a soldier) soldiering was typically seen

as existing in distinction to labour. Thus the labouring 'ploughmen', as much in Clare's autobiographical works as Cowper's *The Task*, are able to challenge their status as simply ploughmen through becoming soldiers.

Soldiers' tales could function to develop stories of labouring-class life that implicitly challenged the definitions of working men as workers, and enabled them to figure as other kinds of men, linked with nationalism, genius and heroism. And as one of his reviewers observed of Clare's reflections on his time spent as a soldier in the local militia – '[h]e still speaks of the short period passed in his new character, with evident satisfaction'.⁴⁹

John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan have recently argued for the importance of recognizing Clare's place within a longer tradition of labouring-class poets, arguing that 'the labouring-class tradition in poetry is an unavoidable, central context for understanding Clare's achievement'.⁵⁰ But equally he can be located within a wider cultural context of labouring-class writing that was emerging in the immediate post-war period. The same cultural moment that saw Clare emerge as a poet also saw Thomas, Downing, Rees and numerous other soldiers emerge as authors. In many ways there were significant parallels between the way the writing of Clare and the soldier authors were considered. These soldiers, as much as Clare, were deemed to write pleasing and instructive work in large part because of their station in life and the unsophisticated and observant nature of their writing. So too, soldiering played an important role in Clare's own development as a poet. Our understanding of Clare's poetry as Romantic labouring-class writing can only be deepened if we acknowledge another important contemporary mode of labouring-class cultural production – the 'structure of romance' of the soldiers' story.

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NOTES

1. For a review of this literature, see Sara Houghton, 'John Clare and Reevaluation', *Literature Compass*, 2 (2005), 1–26, 14.
2. For recent discussions of the influence of the wars on the romantic period see Simon Bainbridge, *British Poetry and the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars* (Oxford, 2003), J.R. Watson, *Romanticism and War: A Study of British Romantic Period Writers and the Napoleonic Wars* (Basingstoke, 2003) and *Romantic Wars: Studies in Culture and Conflict, 1793–1822*, ed. Philip Shaw (Aldershot, 2000).
3. For biographical discussions of Clare's time in the militia see Jonathan Bate, *John Clare: A Biography* (New York, 2003), 77–9; Edward Storey, *A Right to Song: The Life of John Clare* (London, 1982), 74–6; Fredrick Martin, *The Life of John Clare* (London, 1964), 46–7; John and Anne Tibble, *John Clare: His Life and Poetry* (London, 1956), 27–8 and June Wilson, *Green Shadows: The Life of John Clare* (London, 1951), 45–7. None of these works attempt to assess the interaction of his early effort to publish a ballad and his time in the militia, though Storey does comment of the episode that it represents 'an early example of his practical attitude to making some money out of his talent', *A Right to Song*, 75.
4. Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society, 1815–1914* (London, 1980), 49–52.
5. Michael Glover, *Wellington's Army in the Peninsula, 1808–1814* (London, 1977), 24.
6. J.E. Cookson, 'War', in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776–1832*, ed. Iain McCalman (Oxford, 1999), 26–34, 30.
7. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation* (New Haven and London, 1992).
8. Clare served in the local militia, which had been established in 1807. See Bob Heyes, 'John Clare and the Militia', *John Clare Society Journal*, 4 (1985), 48–54, 48–9.
9. H.V. Bowen, *War and British Society, 1688–1815* (Cambridge, 1998), 14.
10. Peter Lloyd, *The French Are Coming! The Invasion Scare of 1803–5* (Tunbridge Wells, 1991), 134.
11. Gillian Russell, *The Theatres of War: Performance, Politics and Society, 1793–1815* (Oxford, 1995).
12. Scott Hughes Myerly, *British Military Spectacle: From the Napoleonic Wars through the Crimea* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England, 1996), 11.

13. Kevin Linch, 'A Geography of Loyalism? The Local Militia Forces of the West Riding of Yorkshire, 1794–1814', *War and Society*, 19, 1 (2001), 1–20, 17.
14. 'Captain Birch and Lord Selkirk on National Defence', quoted in *Quarterly Review*, 24 (1808), 416–32, 428.
15. John Clare, *John Clare by Himself*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Achington and Manchester, 1996), 40. All further references are in parentheses in the text.
16. Mark Storey, 'Clare, John (1793–1864)', in *An Oxford Companion to the Romantic Age: British Culture 1776–1832*, ed. Iain McCalman (Oxford, 1999), 455.
17. Bate, *John Clare*, 77 and 104.
18. Clare calls the printing office 'Bells the printers', *John Clare by Himself*, 97. His biographers do not provide any information on its whereabouts, though it was presumably located in Oundle.
19. It is also possible that the publication could have left Clare and his publisher open to charges of sedition if it was seen to have created discontent amongst his fellow militiamen. William Blake was notably charged with sedition in 1803 after an altercation with a soldier, John Schofield, who had accused him of the seditious remarks. As Michael Lobban has shown, however, the political climate of the later years of the wars meant that it would have been unlikely that Clare would be accused of sedition. Libel cases resulting from comments made about soldiers were common in this period though. See Michael Lobban, 'From Seditious Libel to Unlawful Assembly: Peterloo and the Changing Face of Political Crime c1770–1820', *Oxford Journal of Legal Studies*, 10 (1990), 307–52, 326.
20. William Cowper, *The Task* (London, 1773), 169–70.
21. Bob Heyes does suggest that Clare may have been transformed in the sense that he had more of an 'itch' for travelling after his experience as a soldier. See Heyes, 'John Clare and the Militia', 54.
22. Betty T. Bennett, *British War Poetry in the Age of Romanticism: 1793–1815* (New York and London, 1976), 66.
23. C.W.C. Oman, *Wellington's Army, 1809–1814* (London, 1968), pp. 2–3.
24. Robert Butler, *Narrative of the Life and Travels of Sergeant B., Written by Himself* (Edinburgh, 1823).
25. Most such accounts were recorded by men, such as Robert Butler, who had spent time in the militia before becoming regular soldiers and campaigning
- overseas. Accounts of militia service by men who were primarily civilians, like Clare, were very rare. *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated Critical Bibliography*, eds. John Burnett, David Vincent and David Mayall, vol. 1, 1790–1900 (Brighton, 1984), does note that David Hoggart, who wrote his memoirs as *The Life of David Hoggart ... Written by Himself While Under Death Sentence* (Edinburgh, 1821), served with the Norfolk Militia towards the end of the war, p. 132. Notably though, unlike the accounts of soldiering in the regular army that were appearing at the same time, his service as a soldier in the militia was not, in itself, the rationale for the publication of his memoirs.
26. Anonymous, *Vicissitudes in the Life of a Scottish Soldier. Written by Himself* (London, 1827), vi.
27. Thomas, *Journal of a Soldier of the Seventy-First, Highland Light Infantry, from 1806 to 1815*, ed. John Howell, 3rd edn. (Edinburgh, 1822), iii.
28. Thomas, *Journal of a Soldier of the Seventy-First Regiment, from 1806 to 1815*, ed. John Howell, in *Memoirs of the Late War. Constable's Miscellany*, 27 (Edinburgh, 1828), 22.
29. Alexander Alexander, *The Life of Alexander Alexander: Written by Himself*, ed. John Howell (Edinburgh and London, 1830), ii.
30. *Monthly Magazine*, 49 (March 1820), 164, in *Clare: the Critical Heritage*, ed. Mark Storey (London, 1973), 77.
31. James Downing, *A Narrative of the Life of James Downing (a Blind Man) Late a Private in His Majesty's 20th Regiment of Foot. Containing Historical, Naval, Military, Moral, Religious and Entertaining Reflections. Composed by Himself in Easy Verse, and Published at the Request of his Friends*, 3rd edn. (London, 1815), i.
32. Paul Chirico, 'Authority and Community: John Clare and John Taylor', *Authorship, Commerce and the Public: Scenes of Writing, 1750–1850*, ed. E.J. Clery (Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2002), 84–99, 89.
33. *Monthly Review*, 91 (March 1820), 296–300, in *Critical Heritage*, 74.
34. Thomas Rees, *A Journal of the Voyages and Travels, by the Late Thomas Rees, Sergeant of Marines. Published for the Benefit of the Author's Orphan Daughter* (London, 1822), v–vi.
35. David Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London, 1981), 26.
36. *Monthly Magazine*, 49 (March 1820), 164, in *Critical Heritage*, 76.

37. *British Critic*, 13 (June 1820), 662–7, in *Critical Heritage*, 103.
38. *Antijacobin Review*, 58 (June 1820), 348–53, in *Critical Heritage*, 105.
39. Linda Colley, 'Whose Nation? Class and National Consciousness in Britain 1750–1830', *Past and Present*, 113 (1986), 97–117, 113.
40. William Cobbett, *A Grammar of the English Language*, ed. Charles C. Nickerson and John W. Osborne (Amsterdam, 1983), 27.
41. John Taylor, 'Introduction' to *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (London, 1820), in *Critical Heritage*, 48.
42. E.S. Turner, *Gallant Gentlemen: A Portrait of the British Officer 1600–1956* (London, 1956), 39.
43. Peter Spence, *The Birth of Romantic Radicalism: War, Popular Politics and English Radical Reformism, 1800–1815* (Aldershot, 1996), 110.
44. Joseph Donaldson, *Recollections of an Eventful Life Chiefly Passed in the Army. By a Soldier*, 2nd edn (Glasgow, 1825), pp. 86–7.
45. *London Magazine*, 5 (1826), 501 and *Quarterly Review*, 35 (1827), 149.
46. *The Early Poems of John Clare, 1804–1822*, ed. Eric Robinson, David Powell and Margaret Grainger (2 vols, Oxford, 1989), i, 211.
47. Clive Emsley, 'The Social Impact of the French Wars', in *Britain and the French Revolution, 1789–1815*, ed. H.T. Dickinson (London, 1989), 211–27, 226.
48. Carolyn Steedman, *The Radical Soldier's Tale: John Pearnan, 1819–1908* (London and New York, 1988), 39.
49. *Quarterly Review*, 23 (May 1820), 166–74, in *Critical Heritage*, 96.
50. John Goodridge and Bridget Keegan, 'John Clare and the Traditions of Labouring-Class Verse', in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740–1830*, ed. Thomas Keymer and John Mee (Cambridge, 2004), 280–95, 293.

Reviews

JOHN BARRELL, *The Spirit of Despotism: Invasions of Privacy in the 1790s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 278. £50.00 hardback. 0 19 928120 3.

John Barrell's latest book bears all the hallmarks of his exemplary scholarship: meticulous research, a lucid and pacy prose style that renders even the most detailed or difficult material accessible and exciting, and, most importantly, a sustained level of interdisciplinarity. *The Spirit of Despotism* builds its thesis upon an extraordinary array of sources spanning the breadth of cultural registers and media: from poems and journals, to maps of London, loyalist medals, political caricatures, and legal and parliamentary proceedings. Such a range of reference represents, for Barrell, a conscious exegetical strategy that seeks to avoid the label and potential pitfalls of 'old new historicism', as he calls it, and to occupy 'a space somewhere between political and cultural history' (p. 14). Prescriptions of space, physical and theoretical, are central to the book's concerns. Barrell contends that the 1790s involved the 'politicization of the private' on a previously unseen scale (p. 8), and argues that the reaction of the Pittite administration to the regime of regicide and Terror in revolutionary France, and later to the continental war, involved new forms of state oppression and political surveillance that challenged the late eighteenth-century paradigm of privacy. The reactionism of the Tory government during this period has been well documented and debated by both historians and literary critics, as has its corollary in studies of parliamentary reformism, literary radicalism, the censorship of the press and theatre, and the state treason trials; Barrell's thesis marks a departure from these surveys in that it considers the consequences of institutionalised

repression on private spheres such as those of metropolitan geography, cosmetics, and cottage life – spheres that have been largely neglected by current research.

Barrell is keenly aware of the two major problems that such an approach entails: firstly, the difficulty of gathering and organising the often sparse and disparate evidential data relating to areas that were, by definition, beyond the apparatuses of regulation or reliable public records; and, secondly, the need to delimit the vast field of potential cultural material invoked in his notion of 'invasions of privacy'. He overcomes the first of these by working his argument around an exhaustively researched and adeptly managed plethora of sources, and the second by selecting just five instances of the aggressive renegotiation of British culture that, he maintains, pervades the decade. Each of these examples, through which Barrell structures his book, embody public incursions into issues or sites that, prior to 1789, were considered domestic, personal, or even trivial. In each case Barrell opens up his discussion by way of an historical or literary anecdote – the Godwinian man of talent pacing the city, the arrest of John Frost for republican sentiments voiced in a coffee house, or the bear's grease advocated in 1795 as a hair-restorative – which he then skilfully unpicks, eliciting complex issues from these brief narratives that serve as the basis for further analysis. His first chapter attempts to reconstruct the political geography of 1790s London. Barrell maps the polarised economic and ideological climate of the period onto the east–west division of the city and notes several occurrences of protests and triumphal parades that functioned as 'plebeian invasions of the west end' (p. 45). He then gives specific consideration to the distribution of divisions