

## A Year in the life of a Workscape 2: Winter 12.12.2012

(All text and pictures C Jonathan Brockbank)

Winter was a paradoxical time for rural labourers. On the one hand the work they had to do would often take place in wet or freezing weather, on the other hand, between autumn harvest and new year ploughing, there was less work to do and, because labourers' work was determined by light, fewer hours of daylight to work in. The Twelve Days of Christmas comprised one of the quietest times of the agricultural year and it was then that many traditional entertainments and celebrations took place. Clare mentions many of these in a couple of letters intended for *The Every-day Book* 1825. Both are quoted in full in Deacon (pps 283-290). Of most interest to 19<sup>th</sup> century folklorists was Clare's mention of what he calls 'The Morris Dance', which was not a dance but a short play. In 1968 a Peterborough mummers' play was put together from traditional sources and has been played intermittently ever since [http://www.mummersunconvention.com/?page\\_id=1083](http://www.mummersunconvention.com/?page_id=1083). This involves Robin Hood; performance pictures are included on <http://www.huntingdondramaclub.org.uk/archives0413/mummers.htm>. More conventional mummers' plays in Northampton are listed at <http://www.folkplay.info/Links/Northamptonshire.htm>, with pictures of the Mouton Mummers at <http://www.folkplay.info/Gallery/Moulton2004.htm>.

Clare's mumming play, with its protagonists of Prince George and the king of Egypt, has more in common with the Mouton version. Nevertheless Clare was deeply interested in the legends of Robin Hood and wrote two ballads about the folk-hero. They are 'Robin Hood & the Gamekeepers – a Ballad' and 'How they Robbed the Priest of Lorn' (Deacon, p164/p138). Though the letters to *The Every-day Book* are condescending about the customs he describes: 'so mutilated by its different performers that I could make no sense of it' (Deacon, p285), 'Deckt out in ribbons Gay' is more positive about the Mummers' play:

Deckt out in ribbons gay & papers cut  
Fine as a maidens fancy off they strut  
& act the morris dance from door to door  
(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p91)

Apart from the feasting at Christmas, the cold seasons were times of scarcity because all the wild plants that could supplement diets were dead.

*Southwards down Out Gang*

Clare understood the vulnerability of the poor to hard weather. In ‘Lapt up in Sacks’ Clare’s grammar refuses to clarify whether it is the horse or the boy who have only sackcloth as extra protection from the weather; what is clear is that both are treated as beasts of burden, sent out in all weathers:

Lapt up in sacks to shun the rain & wind  
& shoes thick clouted with the sticking soil

Nevertheless, like the Chimney Sweeper of Experience, in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, the boy manages to be happy:

The careless hind  
Rides lithely [lithely] & singing to his toil  
(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p15)

Though frosty conditions on tracks like Out Gang would have meant no mud and less possibility of heavy farm carts bogging down, it would have meant an extra hardship to the children of the rural labourers, many of whom, unlike the lad above, would not have shoes.

‘Open Winter’  
– Cart ruts & horse footings scarcely yield  
A slur for boys just crizzled [lightly frozen] & thats all  
Frost shoots his needles by the small dyke side  
& snow in scarce a feather’s seen to fall  
(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p15)



*Out Gang: Frost on the corduroy section.*

**Frost clings to the bare branches of a sapling next to Out Gang, like a parody of blossom.**





*Out Gang: Young oak*

**‘Snow Storm’**

**Spreads a white world all calm and where we go**

**By hedge or wood, trees shine from top to root**

**In feathered foliage flashing light and shade**

**(Summerfield, p76)**

**The record rainfall of 2012 left many fields flooded beyond the capacity of the drainage dykes. They froze in the cold.**



*Out Gang: Flooded, frozen field*

Looking at similar pylons crossing a landscape, Stephen Spender saw ‘the quick perspective of the future’. (‘The Pylons’, ln 16, <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-pylons/>). They supply energy for a domestic warmth and light unimaginable in Clare’s day, even for the rich. Clare does not welcome ‘the future’; he looked to the past for models of personal or social felicity, so his reactions to innovation tend to be negative, calling attention to the destruction of time-honoured ecologies and livelihoods. One of the most vivid presences in his imagination, ‘Swordy Well’, is a place, not a person: ‘I’ve loved thee Swordy Well and love thee still’ (Summerfield, p82). The poem ‘The Lament of Swordy Well’ personifies the site to allow it to complain:

**Yet worried with a greedy pack**

**They rend and delve and tear**



**The very grass from off my back**

**I've scarce a rag to wear**

**(Summerfield, p176)**

The poems can see no compensation for the obliteration of a beloved site, there is no eroticised celebration of the naked new world to come, no equivalent of Spender's 'Bare like nude giant girls that have no secret'. (Ln 8). Modern lovers of pylons have created their own website: <http://www.pylonofthemonth.org/> ...

**Grimston Wood shows some seasonal transformation.**



*Grimston Wood: Winter*

The evergreen Sitka Spruces in the background retain their needles; the silver birches on the right have lost their leaves. The bracken in the foreground is dead.



*Grimston Wood: Frost*

A light sky and glittering frost shift the tonality towards silver. ‘Wood Pictures in Winter’ draws attention to grasses like those in the foreground:

The wood grass plats which last year left behind  
 Weaving their feathery lightness to the wind  
 Look now as picturesque amid the scene  
 As when the summer glossed their stems in green

(Robinson/Summerfield, p142)

The word ‘picturesque’ shows Clare borrowing fashionable terms to try to make a commonplace scene accessible to the trained eye and vocabulary of the connoisseur. The blunter poems of the *Northborough Sonnets* mostly abandon such negotiations.

‘Snow Storm’

What a night the wind howls hisses & but stops  
 To howl more loud while the snow volley keeps



**Incessant batter at the window pane**

**(Robinson/Powell/Dawson, p7)**



***Gipsey Corner***

**The deciduous trees of Gipsey Corner show the effects of winter dramatically, being reduced to bare boughs. The green on the tree on the right is ivy, an evergreen climber.**

**Heslington Tillmire has escaped modern intense agricultural exploitation, especially ploughing, so the main feature of this part of the Tillmire is countless molehills.**





*Heslington Tillmire: Looking north to Heslington Common (Fulford golf course)*



*Heslington Tillmire: Molehills*

Clare loved molehills and moles. 'The Flitting' praises

The muse who sits her down

Upon the molehills little lap

Who feels no fear to stain her gown

And pauses by the hedgerow gap

(Robinson/Summerfield, p181)

'Remembrances' laments seeing: 'the little mouldiwarps [moles] hang sweeing [swinging] to the wind' and the effect of enclosure that has 'hung the moles for traitors' (Robinson/Summerfield, p176/7)

Moles seem to survive cold better than heat; in the fierce heat of July 2013 it was common to see dead moles on the surface as the soil dried out.



*Long Lane: Sunset over field*

The brief day finishes in a blaze of sunset reflected off the ice in a field puddle. Two of Clare's sonnets catch up the ambiguity of winter within the workscape. 'Winter Evening' shows winter as a time when work finishes early: 'And whistling home for bed go weary boys' and livestock are comfortably sheltered:

The crib stock fothered [fed] – horses suppered up

And cows in sheds all littered down in straw

(Robinson/Summerfield, p154/3)

By contrast 'Winter Fields' looks out on a landscape like that of the photo: fields are 'mire and sludge' and the poet wishes for a 'pleasant book to cheat the sway/Of winter' (Robinson/Summerfield p139).