

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: Oxford Brookes University		
Unit of Assessment: 27, English Language and Literature		
Title of case study: Democratising Poetry: Reading and Writing with John Clare		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Jan 2011 – Dec 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Simon Kövesi	Professor of English Literature	[text removed for publication]
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Jan 2014 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact		
<p>Simon Kövesi's revisionary account of John Clare, England's 'peasant poet', has achieved impact by inspiring and empowering people who have been marginalized from mainstream art and culture through pressures of economics, social class or locality. 'Reading and Writing with John Clare' has transformed public understanding of poetry among under-represented communities in four UK areas of significant economic deprivation; improved access and strengthened community through five public libraries; and enriched culture and society through new creative work (poetry, film, theatre, music), generated in partnership with internationally recognised artists, which advocates for the significance of working-class writing. High-profile events and broadcasts in a variety of media have extended the reach of the impact of this research to a worldwide audience.</p>		
2. Underpinning research		
<p>Kövesi's longstanding research on the Romantic poet John Clare (1793-1864) has realised his significance for new and diverse audiences. Since 2003, when Kövesi led a public campaign contesting a claim to the private ownership of the copyright to Clare's autograph manuscripts [R1], his research has successfully advocated for Clare's writings to be made accessible to all readers in perpetuity, regardless of their wealth, status or background. Engaging closely with these writings, and making them accessible to the wider world, Kövesi's research has departed radically from earlier interpretations of Clare, and has stimulated wide interest both within and beyond the academy. His foremost contribution has been to challenge patronising and misleading mythologies stemming from Clare's humble origins as England's pre-eminent labouring-class poet [R2].</p> <p>Clare's epithet as 'peasant poet' was manipulated by his publishers and patrons to launch his career, and critics have often taken this phrase at face value by celebrating him as a writer who was born and not made. Delivering fresh findings from archival sources, including those held at Northamptonshire and Peterborough Central Libraries, Kövesi's work has recovered a more accurate and informed picture of the social conditions under which Clare lived and wrote, and has dispelled the mistaken belief that Clare's working-class origins led inescapably to his deracinated asylum years [R1]. Unexamined assumptions around trauma, destitution, impoverishment, and the alienating effects of labour have often led Clare's readers to underestimate his life and work [R3]. Kövesi's research problematises the relationship between labour and literature, demonstrates the deftness of Clare's own understanding of 'high' and 'low' urban culture, and reveals the complexities and fluidity of his class-inflected identity. In these ways Kövesi has developed a finely-grained picture of the reciprocal currents of creativity and market forces in both the past and the present [R4].</p> <p>As was the case during his lifetime, Clare's 'down to earth' image has proved endlessly malleable, particularly among proto-environmentalists who see eighteenth- and nineteenth-century labouring-class life as inevitably suffused with radical politics. Kövesi has exposed how readings</p>		

of Clare tend to rely on conservative anachronisms which serve the 'green' politics of today, bolstering ecological agendas that the poet himself would not have supported [R1]. His hard-hitting, realistic research reaches readers by showing how Clare's politics were informed by the everyday exigencies of dire poverty rather than by any naïve impulse towards resistance. Relatedly, Kövesi has investigated the reasons why Clare's writing has been nostalgically confined to the local, and has developed a more nuanced understanding of Clare as a poet of place [R1]. His revisionary account de-sentimentalises Clare's rootedness, showing how his writing life was shaped by contact with others in London [R4, R6] and by his wide reading. Clare's sceptical and enquiring mind was capable of reflecting shrewdly on the helps and hindrances offered by static emplacement, and these reflections reach out beyond his specific historical context to contemporary readers.

Kövesi's research has also illuminated the value of new creation as a productive way of engaging with literature and of moving beyond historicist orthodoxies [R4, R5]. Revealing how Clare staked bold claims to his own literary tradition by writing into others' creative work, Kövesi has shown why Clare has inspired such a wealth of responses from writers and artists (John Ashbery, Wendy Cope, Iain Sinclair, Glyn Maxwell, Alice Oswald, Derek Walcott) who have recognised Clare as an avant-garde thinker for our times. Synthesising these responses [R1], and generating new and innovative practice-based research [R5], Kövesi reflects on Clare's status as 'the writer's writer' and articulates, for the first time, the reasons why creative rather than curatorial methodologies bring Clare's articulation of class-based realities back to life today, allowing him to speak directly to current problems of social inclusion and exclusion.

3. References to the research

R1. *John Clare: Nature, Criticism and History*, Palgrave Macmillan (2017). ISBN: 9780230277878. 'If there is one word to summarize the effect of [this book] on current Clare studies, it is 'corrective'' (Nancy Derbyshire, *Wordsworth Circle*); 'a 'must read' in Clare studies for decades to come' (Scott Hess, *John Clare Society Journal*); 'the reader will also be forced to rethink the projects of literary historicism and contemporary ecocriticism and in a way that should, ultimately, refresh and renew these and other politically based approaches' (Bridget Keegan, *European Romantic Review*).

R2. 'Finding Poems, Making Text: John Clare and the Greening of Textual Criticism', *Romanticism*, 17.2 (2011), 135-147. DOI: 10.3366/rom.2011.0019.

R3. 'John Clare's Deaths: Poverty, Education and Poetry' in Simon Kövesi and Scott McEathron (eds.), *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community*, Cambridge University Press (2015). ISBN: 9781107031111.

R4. 'John Clare: Prize-Fighter' and 'The Rural Plural: Andrew Köting, Iain Sinclair and John Clare' in Andrew Köting (ed.), *By Our Selves*, Badbloodandsibyl (2015). ISBN: 9780956873361.

R5. *By Our Selves*, dir. Andrew Köting (Soda Pictures, 2015). 83 mins. EIDR ID: 10.5240/EC28-8F07-388D-599B-8519-Q. Online: <https://vimeo.com/465379899> [Kövesi contributed as researcher, creative consultant and actor].

R6. 'John Hamilton Reynolds, John Clare and *The London Magazine*', *The Wordsworth Circle*, 42:3 (2011), 226-135. DOI: 10.1086/TWC24043153.

Kövesi has edited *The John Clare Society Journal* since 2008 as well as three collections of essays: *John Clare: New Approaches* (John Clare Society, 2001); *New Essays on John Clare: Poetry, Culture and Community* (Cambridge University Press, 2015); and *Palgrave Advances in John Clare Studies* (2020).

Grants Awarded

Arts Council England, National Lottery Project grant - GBP15,000 (Reference: ACPG-00185810); John Clare Society '1820 Anniversary Grant' - GBP2,000.

4. Details of the impact

Working with the support of Arts Council England (ACE) National Lottery funding (GBP15,000), Kövesi has unlocked the democratising potential of Clare's poetry and working-class art more generally. 'Reading and Writing with John Clare' has generated a wide range of impacts on creativity, culture and society by: A) identifying and empowering working-class writers in hard-to-reach communities; B) improving access and creating community in five public libraries; C) generating and disseminating new works which enrich public understanding of John Clare; D) raising public awareness about the value of working-class writing.

A) identifying and empowering working-class writers in hard-to-reach areas

With the benefit of ACE National Lottery funding, Kövesi planned and delivered 16 free, day-long creative writing workshops in spring/summer 2019. Held in partnership with five libraries in UK areas of significant economic deprivation (Peterborough Central Library, Bradford & Keighley Libraries, Manchester Central Library, Clapham Library), the workshops were led by four of the UK's leading poets (Sarah Corbett, John Gallas, Karen McCarthy-Wolf, Clare Shaw). Around 80 participants were supported to produce their own poems in response to John Clare's, with vulnerable individuals from supported communities taking part alongside young writers from BAME backgrounds and senior citizens. Many were new to creative writing, and almost all were unfamiliar with Clare's poetry. Participants described how the project inspired them to develop new skills: *'I didn't envisage being able to write poems at all, and have felt motivated to do so following [Clare's] style and inspiration'*. Clare's use of local dialect proved particularly effective in engendering new poetry among diverse participants who were encouraged to discover *'that Clare didn't use formal punctuation'*, that he *'used the everyday language he knew, using colloquial words'* and that he *'writes as people speak'*. Participants described being *'transformed'* by the project, finding themselves *'more confident, with fresh insight'*. The workshops made writing poetry *'seem entirely possible'* and something they were now *'much more likely to do'* [S1].

The four poet-tutors, all of whom are actively engaged as teachers or social activists, described the project's transformative impact on their own creative and pedagogic practice [S2]. Shaw expressed her involvement with the project as *'some of the most unusual, engaging and rewarding work of my literary career,'* praising Kövesi's *'fierce and freely shared passion for his subject... which did away with the normal hierarchies and binaries of learning'* and the project's demonstration of *'the potential of poetry to create a lasting liberatory and transformative legacy for all people and communities'* [S2]. The poems generated in the workshops were edited by Kövesi and the four poet-tutors in a book entitled *The Meeting: Reading and Writing through John Clare* (John Clare Society, 2020). Freely available on the project website <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/the-meeting/> [S3], and distributed in hard copy to all participants, the book has so far reached 180 readers. One of the 51 participants whose work features in the book wrote: *'I learned from my tutors about the joy of [Clare's] poetry and how I can respond to that in my own writing... I was particularly struck by how accessible what we learned was. Poetry, politics, the arts felt very much for everyone'* [S4].

B) improving access and creating community through five public libraries

By building on Kövesi's longstanding commitment to democratising Clare's legacy, and by demystifying poetry, the project has contributed to the ability of five local libraries to improve

access to the arts in hard-to-reach constituencies. Dionne Hood, Development Officer at Bradford Library, confirms that the project '*precisely delivered and contributed to what we always hope to achieve as a library service*' by involving '*people who wouldn't usually get the opportunity, or are nervous about taking part*' [S5]. Many participants from BAME, disabled, LGBT+ or working-class backgrounds subsequently joined the library's other events and workshops. One participant wrote that the sessions '*inspired and encouraged me... to feel part of a vibrant, relevant community*' [S1]; several others, including the poet-tutors, noted that the gatherings created by the project showed capacity to '*develop as a group/community*' [S2]. Tim O'Dell, development librarian at Lambeth Libraries, praised the workshops' positive effect on the '*diverse inner city, urban, population*' served by the library, commenting that Kövesi's reinterpretation of Clare allowed participants '*to explore their own environment in a way which was fresh and exhilarating*'. O'Dell noted that '*The success of this project challenged many in the Library Service to see how literature can truly speak across race, culture, geography and time*' and confirmed the library's plans to engage with similar projects in future [S5].

C) generating and disseminating new works which enrich public understanding of John Clare

Kövesi's distinctive reading of Clare's life and works led to his appointment as researcher, creative consultant and actor for the feature film *By Our Selves* (2015), directed by award-winning independent film-maker Andrew Kötting in collaboration with celebrated psycho-geographer Iain Sinclair. The film traces the 90-mile walk undertaken in 1841 by Clare, played here by internationally recognised award-winning actors Toby Jones and Freddie Jones. Describing Kövesi as a '*vital element of the film project*', Kötting confirms that it was Kövesi's re-interpretation of Clare which allowed the film '*to correct some of the simple, cosy, folk mythology, to be less precious than most about Clare's class origins, and to muddy the waters of the accepted sense of Clare as a Green Messiah*' [S6]. The work of the film is recorded in the book *By Our Selves* which has so far sold 180 copies [R4]. Independently funded by a Kickstarter campaign which raised £20,000, the film was positively reviewed in the *Guardian* ('*magnificent*') and by Mark Kermode in the *Observer* who singled out Kövesi's contribution. The film was praised by the British Film Institute as full of '*poised intent*', by the *Hollywood Reporter* as '*a feast for the senses*', and by the *Radio Times* as '*mesmerising and surprisingly moving*' [S7]. The film played at festivals including the 2015 Festival International de Cinéma de Marseille, where it won the International Competition and a Grand Prix Special Mention; the 2015 Montreal International Documentary Festival, where it was a nominee for the Grand Prize in the International Feature Competition; the London Short Film Festival; and the East End Film Festival. It was released throughout cinemas in UK and Ireland, and was then adopted by Thunderbird Releasing where it has been downloaded c. 11, 000 times. Two anonymous reviewers have described it as a '*fantastic film - really absorbing, interesting and unusual*' and as '*an amazing piece of art*' [S7].

Toby Jones' commitment to a long-term collaborative partnership with Kövesi is fuelled by what Jones calls their shared desire '*to bring Clare's wonderful words to as wide an audience as possible*' [S6]. With this aim in mind, Jones will reprise his role as Clare in the project's culminating event: an original stage show entitled *The Fallen Elm* devised by Kövesi in collaboration with scriptwriter Stephen Plaice, and celebrated composer Julian Philips who has described how Kövesi's fostering of '*a richer and more complex understanding of the breadth, range and power of Clare's creative output*' has changed his own creative practice [S8]. Plaice also affirms that it is Kövesi's '*latitude to creative artists to adopt Clare as a talisman*' which allows Clare to be realised as a recognisable figure for our own time [S8]. The show's producer, Kate Romano, describes how the insights generated by working on *The Fallen Elm* are now '*deeply embedded*' in her own understanding of music-and-spoken-word productions, and will have a legacy in future work curated by her charitable company Goldfield Productions [S8]. The project

team have been contracted by NMC Recordings to produce an album of original musical compositions and poetry readings in response to Clare's folksongs. Under Kövesi's leadership, this album will be freely available on the project website and then commercially released in summer 2021. [See S9, and accompanying Covid-19 statement].

D) raising public awareness of the value of working-class writing

The project has promoted public understanding of working-class poetry, especially John Clare's, through a variety of media including radio, podcasts and public events. Kövesi has reached a wide national and international audience through his appearances on BBC Radio 4's *Open Book* (April 2019) and *In Our Time* (February 2017). Each of these live broadcasts, combined with subsequent repeated broadcasts, reached c. 2.5 million listeners with a further c. 800,000 listeners downloading each programme in the following month, and c. 700,000 downloading the podcasts afterwards. Kövesi also featured on *Thinking on Their Feet: John Clare* (originally aired April 2003 on BBC Radio 3; repeated by Radio 4's Poet in Residence, Daljit Nagra, in April 2017 and September 2020). Kövesi and Toby Jones collaborated to produce an audio anthology of Clare's poetry, publicly available on Spotify, iTunes and *The Meeting* website [S3]. These recordings, designed as a free resource for all readers, have been accessed more than 2,500 times; listeners have described them as '*really beautiful*' and '*inspiring*'. A live preview event for *The Fallen Elm*, held at Oxford Brookes' 'Think Human' Festival in February 2020 and featuring criticism, poetry and music by Kövesi, Jones and Philips, attracted an audience of 170. According to one attendee, '*This event uncovered John Clare for our own times, stripped of cant and nostalgia... an event truly for everyone and about everyone*'. Others praised this '*engrossing... 5* event*,' commenting '*Long live John Clare - most under-rated English poet*' [S10].

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S1. Feedback from poetry workshop participants (Peterborough Central Library, Bradford & Keighley Libraries, Manchester Central Library, Clapham Library).

S2. Statements by workshop tutors (Dr Sarah Corbett, John Gallas, Dr Karen McCarthy-Wolf, Clare Shaw).

S3. Project website: <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/the-meeting/>. This collects photos of the workshops; work in draft; Toby Jones' audio performances of an anthology of Clare's poetry and prose (with accompanying texts); and a free PDF of the project's book, *The Meeting*, which contains work by Kövesi, composer Julian Philips, playwright Stephen Plaice, and original contributions by 51 of the workshop participants as well as commissioned poems responding to Clare by the four poet tutors.

S4. Feedback on *The Meeting: Reading and Writing through John Clare* (John Clare Society, 2020), ISBN: 978-1-9161355-2-9, 92 pp.

S5. Statements by Dionne Hood, Development Officer at Bradford Libraries; and Tim O'Dell, Development Librarian (adult reading) at Lambeth Libraries.

S6. Testimonials by Toby Jones (October 2020); and Prof. Andrew Kötting (September 2020).

S7. Reviews of film *By Our Selves* (*Hollywood Reporter*, *Guardian*, *Observer*, BFI, etc.).

S8. Testimonials by Prof. Julian Philips, Composer and Head of Composition at Guildhall School of Music and Drama (April 2020); Prof. Stephen Plaice, dramatist and scriptwriter for *The Fallen Elm* (April 2020); and Dr Kate Romano, musician, writer, broadcaster, and producer of *The Fallen Elm* (May 2020).

S9. Publicity materials (poster and flyer) for *The Fallen Elm* (26 April 2020).

S10. Feedback from project event at Oxford Brookes 'Think Human' Festival (2 February 2020).