

A Length of Road: Interview with Robert Hamberger *Simon Kövesi*

Robert Hamberger has published four poetry collections. His latest, 'Blue Wallpaper', was shortlisted for the 2020 Polari Prize. In 1995 Robert retraced John Clare's 1841 walk of eighty-five miles from High Beach asylum to his home in Northborough. His first non-fiction book *A Length of Road: Finding myself in the footsteps of John Clare*, and the occasion for this interview, describes the experience of this walk at a time of personal crisis, reflecting on, and contrasting with, Clare's journey. It was published by John Murray in June 2021. The book is genre-fluid: part memoir, part nature writing, part literary criticism, with twenty-eight poems in Clare's voice and the voices of those he met on his walk. It is an exploration of class, gender, family, friendship, grief and sexuality through the author's own experiences and the autobiographical writing of John Clare. This interview was conducted by correspondence between Robert Hamberger and Simon Kövesi across April and May 2021. The interview is followed by a few sample poems from *A Length of Road*.

Simon Kövesi: What drew you to John Clare for this project?

Robert Hamberger: John Clare is one of a few writers who seems to have followed me through various parts of my life. In *A Length of Road* I write about how I was first introduced to him at the age of fifteen, when my Art teacher in our Bethnal Green grammar school lent me a book of his poems. I hadn't heard of him before then. I loved his poems, their direct beauty had a real impact on me. I called them 'true poetry' in my teenage journal at the time. I think maybe if you're introduced to a great writer at a susceptible age they stay with you, almost become a talisman. I remember seeing Hilton's portrait of him at The National Portrait Gallery sometime shortly after that, and it's such a starry image

of a poet, staring ahead as if he's inspired. For an arty teenager with ambitions to write such images stay with you. I moved from London to Northamptonshire when I married in the late seventies, as my wife came from Northamptonshire. Clare was then (and probably still is) very much seen as Northamptonshire's poet, so I visited his birthplace (years before it was a museum) and I want to say how much his biography gets mixed up with his poetry: this peasant poet who became an overnight success, took trips to London, stayed besotted with his first love Mary and ended up in Northampton Asylum. For a working-class writer like myself I think there's something almost like an intriguing warning in Clare's story: the dangers of 'literature' for working-class writers. I don't think that's logical or thought out, but I'd suggest there's something mythical and emblematic in Clare for working-class writers. I only found out about his walk from the asylum in Epping Forest towards his home a year or so before I retraced it in 1995. When I read his marvellous journal of the walk I was bowled over, and knew instinctively I wanted to retrace it. That certainly wasn't thought out either, as regards the practical obstacles of eighty-five miles in four days, trying to keep as much as possible to his route along the Great North Road, as far as I understood it then. But I knew I wanted to retrace it, and sleep rough as he did, and try to write about the experience, as a tribute to him, to put myself in his shoes, if that might at all be possible.

SK: What do you think happens to Clare's poetry and prose, and to you as a reader, once you have 'experienced' its places first-hand, as it were? And how did these places impact you as a writer?

RH: One of Clare's beauties is that he is a tremendously immediate writer. We're beside him, for example, in his brilliant Northborough sonnets. We hush when he tells us, and 'part aside / These hazel branches' with him as we approach 'The Nightingale's Nest'. Of course I now read the journal of his walk differently since I experienced those eighty-five miles in my pores and the soles of my feet. I agree with Iain Sinclair that Clare's 'Journey out of Essex' is 'one of the wonders of English prose.' He writes in such a visceral way about the exhaustion and disorientation of long distance walking, and I tried to capture some of that in writing about my walk, tried to make

the reader feel the blisters, so to speak. It's one reason I kept the walk in the present tense: not only because I was speaking into a dictaphone as I walked, but because Clare somehow shows us how the act of walking can feel eternally present in a walking body. Clare's account reminds me of Werner Herzog's book 'Of Walking in Ice' about his 1974 walk from Munich to Paris, a book that was helpful to me when I was drafting *A Length of Road*. On my retracing I think I may have found the milestone Clare refers to at Jack's Hill ('the last Mile stone 35 Miles from London') and even if I'm wrong, it was magical to feel the whiff of his presence, or kid myself I could. There's a similar sense of him permeating Helpston, Glinton and Northborough I think, and his writing helps me reconsider that landscape, which is unfamiliar to me. It's not that Clare made his mark in those villages and fields. Somehow he's too secretive a writer for that – or he refuses to place himself above or beyond the landscape. Maybe we still sense his attentiveness and commemoration of those places through his poems. One of the things Clare teaches us is that sights that could be dismissed as mundane or run-of-the-mill have significance if we pay attention, and that's always useful for a writer to remember: simply observe.

SK: In this book, you document how you have followed Clare's tracks in geographical – even biographical – ways. I wonder how or whether you see yourself as an heir to Clare, in stylistic, technical or linguistic terms? Do you think his art has informed your own? And are there other writers who have had similar impacts on your own art?

RH: I'd like to suggest that any contemporary working-class writer might be seen as an heir to Clare, because his example of perseverance, staying true to his vision and language despite financial and artistic pressures, is so important. On the other hand, it may feel a little presumptuous of me to claim myself as one of his heirs. Our subject matter is totally different, as I don't usually focus that closely on nature in most of my poetry, though Clare's example helped me to focus on the nature and wildlife I encountered during my walk, and I tried to develop that in my poems in *A Length of Road*. I think Clare has taught me in two fundamental ways. The first is that we share a love of sonnets. I'm not half as inventive in sonnet forms as Clare. My rhyme-

schemes stick pretty rigidly to Shakespearean and Petrarchan forms, and I experiment with unrhymed sonnets, whereas his playfulness with original sonnet rhyme-schemes is daring and impressive. But that immediacy I mentioned earlier in his writing is in full display in his sonnets. Any sonneteer can learn a great deal from him. The second lesson I learned from Clare I'm still learning, and that's through what I might term his honest use of language. Unlike Clare, I don't use dialect in my poems, but I have what I'd call a political belief in trying to write as directly, as simply, as possible in my poems, so that my poems could be accepted – and (hopefully) responded to – by people who may not usually be experts in contemporary poetry, or may be put off by linguistic gymnastics or ironic distance or complex references. Trying to write as simply as I can feels like an aesthetic choice based on my working-class origins, so I would say that Clare has influenced me – and continues to influence me – in those terms. Other writers who have had complementary influences on my art are queer American writers like Adrienne Rich and Mark Doty. I love Rich's fierce political engagement and Doty's lyricism and unashamed focus on the self. I've learned from them both about using the scrutiny of an autobiographical lens as frankly as possible in my poetry and my memoir.

SK: You are open and very detailed about your personal relationships in this book. What do you think are the risks and the benefits – to you both as a private person and also as a public artist, and to us as readers – of such closely confessional literature?

RH: The drafting of my memoir took place – on and off – over twenty-five years, since my retracing of Clare's walk happened in 1995. There was a great deal of hesitation, self-doubt and self-sabotage during its various drafts, as well as feeling that no-one may be interested in my story, that it was potentially arrogant of an unknown working-class poet both to write about Clare and to place my life centre-stage. So for those years of drafting part of me was convinced that the book wouldn't be published anyway. This meant I had to write it primarily for myself, to use the memoir as an attempt to make sense of my experience, whatever had happened in my life to lead me to the point of my four-day walk. It meant confronting the artistic risks of honesty (as much as possible) and self-examination, self-judgement. Of course part

of me kept half an eye on the possibility of future publication, so although many of the details might feel to a reader like radical self-exposure there were some aspects of my life I've chosen not to share in the book. Memoir is a paradox, in that it's an apparently private form in a public forum. Yet reading is essentially a private act: just the author and the reader. So I need to speak intimately to the reader for the memoir to feel valid. I need to confess my vulnerabilities and my sins, and hope that by doing so an act of empathy might happen. The reader might feel 'I have felt that, or something similar. I've made similar mistakes and errors, been similarly confused or depressed.' I'm a pro-feminist writer, so I believe the personal is political. Although you could argue that men have told their stories *ad nauseam*, I wanted to unpeel the public mask of masculinity. I felt it was important to try and admit vulnerability, fallibility. For example, the end of a marriage is unfortunately all too common, but I think it might help others in similar crises to hear a man speak honestly about his mess of feelings when a long love ends. As we know with the high rate of male suicides, men still have damaging difficulties in admitting vulnerability, talking about their mental health, even trying to voice their confusions and fears, because it's still seen as a sign of



Robert Hamberger, 2021

weakness within both patriarchy and capitalism. As men, I think we have to counter that self-destructive message by speaking as honestly as possible about our fears and so-called weakness, about how important love and friendships are to us, how we need to understand our sexuality and any misogyny in ourselves, how we want to retain close relationships with our children. Before publication my family read the manuscript and I would never have included anything in the book that they were unhappy about. I made that clear to them when the book was accepted for publication. I think that respect for the people depicted in the book is crucial, and for those people in the book who have since died, I felt all I could do was honour their memory and complexity as best I could. I only have the right to tell my own story, not theirs, and to assume nothing about their motives or feelings or actions. To me memoirs are essentially about empathy, so it's worth taking personal and artistic risks to achieve the possibility of connection, to make it real.

SK: Towards the end of *A Length of Road*, you ask 'What can I trust in this new loneliness?' In the end, is the act of reaching out and tracking Clare in such intimate and self-revelatory detail working to form an act of poetic community, or does it rather serve to reinscribe the complete loneliness and isolation of both Clare and you, as a contemporary pilgrim poet? Does reading Clare make us more lonely?

RH: What an intriguing question! I say early on in *A Length of Road* that my retracing of Clare's walk is a clumsy attempt to 'claim kinship' with Clare, while admitting I have no right to do so. I think working-class and other marginalised writers – who don't necessarily see their lives reflected or represented in books – may have an instinctive need to hunt for models, for those who've blazed a trail before us from similar circumstances, no matter how full of confusion, error and difference those earlier examples may be. We can learn from them – we probably need to – about their strategies for perseverance, how they kept writing. I believe that Clare blazed a trail for all writers who are working-class or from rural communities or who may have experienced mental illness or who are acutely aware of the risks to, and beauties of, nature. That's a wide remit – and a pretty cumbersome burden for him – but his writing covered all those fields, along with loads of

others. I think we're only just starting to properly celebrate Clare for the wide-ranging writer he was. Shifting him closer towards the traditional canon of English poetry feels like a way for the literary establishment to begin to acknowledge how narrow it has been historically, as regards which writers and perspectives are allowed into that canon. I feel on the margins of contemporary English poetry for a range of reasons, including my class origins, my sexuality and the unfashionable approach I take to poetry. But I feel that writing this book was an attempt to create a poetic community, not only with Clare, but with under-represented writers who may have similar origins, face similar dilemmas. To push beyond the working-class pressure to self-censor. We see Clare attempted that breaking of boundaries in sometimes alarming ways, in facing his own misogyny in *Don Juan*, for instance. I acknowledge that the need to create a writing community often comes from a place of isolation or loneliness, but I think the attempt to do so is admirable – it's worth making. In my poem 'Unpacking the Books' I call writers our 'paper companions' and I believe writers can help to reduce our isolation. An example from Clare is probably his most famous line 'I am – yet what I am, none cares or knows'. Its fame shows that it resonates down the generations. Why? Because he found precise words for an isolation (or even desolation) that many of us might have caught a whisker of in our own experiences. So, for me, reading Clare can help us feel less lonely, more connected, both to nature and to aspects of experience – including love of course. It might be helpful to end with Clare's amazing statement in Northampton Asylum that I quote and explore on the night of returning to my rented room after my walk: 'sometimes they called me Shakespeare and sometimes Byron and sometimes Clare'. I sense that might have been Clare's attempt to express how poetry moves even across individual identities. So if we start from isolation or loneliness we could move towards the possibility of dissolving our distinctions, of creating the potential for communities and communication between writers, even across time. I agree with Clare about the honourable nature of making such an attempt.

Three Poems from *A Length of Road*

MOVEMENT

July 20 Reconitred the route the Gipsey pointed out & found it a legible one to make a movement & having only honest courage & myself in my army I led the way & my troops soon followed

I'm squint-eye flap-arm Nelson
puffing up sails as the wind blows,
squashing frogs like scummy jailers
quacks and whores and poxy printers.
If my head's whacked off by a cannonball
I can glue it back again.

Slow down lad. You're Random Jack,
simply aiming home. I've fallen on that word
and live to breathe under clouds I still remember,
to lift my children's waists between my hands –
raise them over my crown and carry them down again,
resting their butterfly's eyelash at the side of my smile.

Her arms will end my wilderness,
hedge me inside to graze her grass.
She'll turn when I knock the kissing-gate.
I'm barred from bee-tickled blades,
until a tongue slipped through her parted teeth
wets mine.

A TALL GYPSY

*I saw a tall Gipsy come out of the Lodge gate & make down the road
...I got up and went on to the next town with her – she cautioned
me on the way to put something in my hat to keep the crown up &
said in a lower tone ‘You’ll be noticed,’ but not knowing what she
hinted I took no notice and made no reply.*

She speaks:

I live this skin, wanting no other:
not to be some milk-face supping indoors.
They quake politely when I read their smiles
as if I’ll blab which husband bores, who dies tomorrow.

We side with each other
for ten furlongs into town,
talk of heading north and why swifts won’t land
before I warn his gawky look.

Ape them or you’ll be noticed.
Straighten your hat. Stiffen its crown
and you can skip their questions.
Take a short cut. Drop the road you’re on.

NOTHING

*July 24 1841. Returned home out of Essex & found no Mary her &
her family are nothing to me now - though she herself was once the
dearest of all - and how can I forget*

Cut my brain in half and pluck her out:
this woman where thought should be,
stooping to touch the cowslips.

I carry myself like spilt wine,
my cup cracked
with the memory of whoever I was.

You can live on so little.
Live on this breath leaving my mouth again,
the song of a robin before it flies.

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