

Preparations

10 February 1995

I spread out four Ordnance Survey maps edge to edge on my front-room carpet. I'm trying to find John Clare's route from the asylum in Epping Forest back to his home in Northborough, near Peterborough. In July 1841 Clare escaped from what he saw as a prison and walked for four days over eighty-five miles to get home, sleeping rough, with little to eat or drink, no money and no map. For the past few months I've been hatching a crazy plan to retrace his walk. My belly's on the maps now. My elbows dent the paper, and my finger's sliding over roads and gradients to find the names mentioned in Clare's account:

Enfield Town

Stevenage

Potton

Buckden

Stilton

Peterborough

Walton

Werrington

They're simply words to me. They don't mean anything yet. I follow a jagged heart-line with my finger, reaching towards Clare's home. I admire his achievement, but I haven't learnt how to read the roads and I'm no seasoned walker.

I fold the maps away, like four paper concertinas. I'm a little dispirited by the challenge I've set myself. Who am I trying to kid? I sit in my home in silence, with my children asleep upstairs and my wife out tonight. Why do I plan to leave them, to walk back to them? Why should I, an unknown poet and social worker from the East End, with three young kids and a marriage in trouble, choose this time to ape John Clare, a great Northamptonshire poet and agricultural labourer? Why does his life and work speak to me, like some sort of kindred spirit, as if I'm lonely for brotherhood across a hundred and fifty years? We both strayed into writing from non-bookish families, misfits hoping poetry might solve our lives, but our circumstances are so different. I've no right to claim kinship. Yet I've got it in my head to copy his walk this Easter, the nearest gap of four days I can find. So far the only thing I'm clear about is wanting to discover some of what Clare went through on his walk by putting myself through a trial of miles, thinking I might capture a tenth of his experience, his shine might rub off on me. What else am I hoping to prove?

9 April

I drive the route of Clare's journey with my friend Ian and my seven-year-old son, Joe: a reconnoitre, as if this odd enterprise has developed into a planned campaign. Ian takes notes of the route in his barbed-wire artist's handwriting: an idiot's guide I'm bound to need because of my problem with maps. 'Left at A112 to Chingford. At A110 junction take right to Enfield across reservoir.'

As we speed through Potter's Bar I notice I LOVE YOU painted on a brick wall. Neat white capitals over two feet high. I imagine a man wrote that message,

decided he would paint it carefully, painstakingly, one night to declare his feelings to whoever lives opposite, leaving it unsigned. I imagine a woman woke to read it the next morning, but I can't work out what she thought. I see her opening her bedroom curtains to it today and every morning, until the message loses its novelty, grows stale. Is that always the way with love?

In the late afternoon we reach Glinton near Northborough, and park the car. We want to find the footpath where Clare would have walked a hundred and fifty years ago. Joe is tired and lolls on the backseat chewing toffees. He's had a long day.

Ian and I stroll to the footbridge over a river among fields and go no further. We check the map and stand talking in the air for a while. Ian praises the usual simple sights around us – sights Clare would have known well – elms under a sea-colour sky; celandines by ploughed soil; this idea of eternal England that Ian paints and still believes in, with all its standing stones, morris dancers and ruined abbeys, rounded off by the sharp detail of a scythe leaning against a dry-stone wall and *The Lark Ascending* as its soundtrack. He's enthusiastic. I'm feeling sceptical and unsettled, slightly daunted by the task ahead. Walking through six counties next week might at least give me a glimpse of how much this chunk of England has changed since Clare's walk, whether any echoes of Ian's eternal England may still be left.

