

accustomed to the “nanny” state, which has had, according to Jim Powell, a deleterious effect on human freedom, economic well-being, and common sense that few dare to question.

Powell is an historian and a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. His revisionist examination of FDR’s New Deal is an assessment of the major players who formed policy during the Roosevelt era and refutes the lingering myth that government programs, public projects, and monetary regulations are good for society. He shows that America, then and now, would have been better off had the New Deal never been implemented. He argues that *laissez-faire* capitalism is cyclical in nature, with a natural ability to rebound, and that government intervention effectively stifles initiative and recovery. He convincingly argues that the New Deal prolonged the Great Depression. His impressive display of hard data supports his conclusion.

The current outsourcing of American jobs serves as a *prima facie* example of how New Deal legislation continues to hurt American businesses. Because of the high cost of American labor, employers are now moving jobs to foreign markets where labor is cheaper. Powell shows this to be the result of minimum-wage legislation and closed-shop union membership, both promoted by Roosevelt. Powell says that these policies deny Americans their fundamental right to freedom of contract and stifle fair-market competition. He demonstrates that, during the Depression, these policies actually increased unemployment, especially among black workers in Southern textile mills. He chronicles the strong-arm activities of unions, the United Auto Workers in particular, that negotiated above-market wages for their members, resulting in General Motors dismissing one quarter of its employees and overall U.S. car production dropping 50 percent between 1937 and 1938. This situation continues today. Recently, union-negotiated healthcare and retirement benefits have raised the cost of G.M. cars \$1,400 per vehicle, endangering sales and undermining the automaker’s competitiveness against foreign companies.

Powell argues that the 1935 Social Security Act, the centerpiece of New Deal legislation, was unfair and unsound: a pyramid scheme that takes workers’ money without the adequate compensation that private investment would garner. The actuarial charts tell the sad tale of

Uncle Sam’s Robin Hood effort. Social Security contributions are now America’s biggest tax, yet projected returns continue to decline. Even worse, Powell writes, according to the majority opinion of the U.S. Supreme Court in *Fleming v. Nestor* (1960), nobody has a contractual right to Social Security benefits. Furthermore, Powell argues, high Social Security taxes have caused many employers to cut their workforces, causing even greater unemployment.

Powell’s book provides much food for thought regarding how we arrived at our present indenturedness to big government, including how many New Deal-era U.S. Supreme Court decisions allowed the government to usurp our economic freedoms. He shows that the present caretaker state whittles away at our fundamental liberties and limits productivity. Powell’s book deserves the careful attention of all those involved in public policy and of Christians who support government programs in the belief that they foster social justice: If anything, these programs have hurt, more than helped, the poor and disenfranchised.

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## Till Earth Was But a Name

by Patrick J. Walsh

### John Clare: A Biography

by Jonathan Bate

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux;  
672 pp., \$40.00

### “I AM”: The Selected Poetry of John Clare

edited by Jonathan Bate

New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux;  
344 pp., \$17.00



Poet John Clare (1793-1864) seems to have grown from the soil. His last name derives from the word *clayer*—someone who manures and enriches clay. As a farm laborer, he drew sustenance from the earth. Immersed in humus, he learned the humility so necessary to creativity. His poems, like furrow lines, break the

surface of things to expose the extraordinary aspect of the ordinary. Delighting in common things—birds, flowers, trees, blades of grass—Clare revels in their simple mystery. It is an art that captures the first day forever dawning.

John Clare was born in Helpston in Northamptonshire, a small village largely undisturbed since the Middle Ages. People kept the old ways and customs, shared the common land, and still observed the pre-Reformation calendar that celebrated all the seasonal festivals. Life was in rhythm with nature, in an era before the Enclosure Acts took their toll and radically reconstructed English rural life.

The Clare family subsisted as farm laborers, living on potatoes and water gruel. When only seven, Clare had a job looking after sheep and geese. At 12, he worked the fields. Never robust in health or temperament, he stood barely five feet five inches, a small, sensitive plant. One reviewer who visited him at Northborough sanitarium described his eyes as “light blue and flashing with genius.”

Clare was reared in an oral tradition of stories and songs. His parents were admired as local storytellers: Clare’s father once said he could sing over a hundred songs. When his workday was finished, Clare studied reading and writing in night classes. At 13, he came across Thompson’s poem “Seasons” and was immensely influenced by it. Thereafter, he read every book he could find, recited poetry to himself in the fields, and wrote verses of his own on discarded scraps of paper.

Jonathan Bate does a fine job in acquainting us with this sadly neglected Romantic poet. The noted Shakespeare scholar spent five years among Clare’s vast archive, determined to fill a void by giving “the one major English poet never to have received a biography worthy of his memory” his due. Bate has succeeded absolutely in his prescribed biographical task.

Published alongside this biography is a companion volume containing a wider selection of poems. *I AM* takes its title from one of Clare’s most anthologized poems:

I am—yet what I am, none cares or  
knows;  
My friends forsake me like a  
memory lost:  
I am the self-consumer of my woes;  
They rise and vanish in oblivion’s  
host

Like shadows in love's frenzied  
stified throes:  
And yet I am and live as vapours  
tossed.

"I AM" was written at the Northampton general lunatic asylum, to which Clare was committed in 1841. Here he spent the rest of his life imagining at times that he was Lord Byron or a prizefighter or that he was married to his childhood sweetheart, Mary, who was a kind of elusive muse for him. What happened to Clare and what he suffered from is still open to speculation. Bate says, "if Clare were alive and receiving psychiatric treatment today he would probably be diagnosed as suffering from manic depression." Another doctor's diagnosis mentions exhaustion from "years spent addicted to poetical prosings."

The world seemed to close in on poor Clare. After his initial success as a poet with the publication of *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* in 1820, Clare married, as his publishers Taylor and Hessey, ever mindful of the example of Robert Burns, had urged him to do. (Clare, like Burns, was overly fond of women and drink.) Patty Turner and John Clare had seven children. Some of the local nobility helped with a generous income of 45 pounds per year, but that was not enough to support Clare's household, which included his parents

Clare's second volume made a respectable showing. In London, he met Coleridge, Lamb, De Quincy, and Hazlitt, but the "peasant poet" rapidly fell out of fashion and was left between two worlds. Looking out of his coach at the laborers in the field, he wrote,

The novelty created strange feelings that I could almost fancy that my identity as well as my occupation had changed—that I was not the same John Clare, but that some stranger had jumped into my skin.

Clare drove himself hard to support his growing family and never ceased writing poetry. Prolific as his output was, his books never sold enough to bring the income he needed.

And the fields he loved were being enclosed for the sake of the industrial efficiency of capitalist agriculture. Between 1760 and 1815, some seven million acres of English common land were made private.

Fence now meets fence in owners'  
little bounds  
Of field and meadow large as  
garden grounds,  
In little parcels little minds to  
please  
With men and flocks imprisoned,  
ill at ease.

The chase of money was in full swing along with the Enlightenment project to reduce all of Creation to a base materialism. A genuine poet, Clare stood against this cloying conformity. "I am as far as politics is concerned for King and Country—no Innovations in Religion and government say I." Yet Clare saw the rapid change around him. He was surrounded by a new people, who "Deem all as rude their kindred did of yore" and who engage in "Affecting high life's airs to scorn the past / Trying to be something makes them nought at last."

Tormented by what he called "blue devils" and the encroaching ache of modernity, Clare took refuge in his own world.

Old custom! O I love the sound,  
However simple they may be—  
Whate'er with time hath sanction  
found  
Is welcome and is dear to me—  
Pride grows above simplicity  
And spurns them from her haughty  
mind  
And soon the poet's song will be

The only refuge they can find.

Clare's work is only now receiving the attention it deserves. His "Shepherds Calendar," Bate argues, "is one of the greatest poems of the nineteenth century." With this new biography and selection of poems, Clare's work is lifted into the realm of the eternal.

#### A Vision

I lost the love of heaven above;  
I spurned the lust of earth below;  
I felt the sweets of fancied love,  
And hell itself my only foe.

I lost earth's joys but felt the glow  
Of heaven's flame abound in me;  
Till loveliness and I did grow  
The bard of immortality.

I loved but woman fell away;  
I hid me from her faded fame:  
I snatched the sun's eternal ray  
And wrote till earth was but a  
name.

In every language upon earth,  
On every shore, o'er every sea,  
I gave my name immortal birth  
And kept my spirit with the free.

Patrick J. Walsh is a writer in Quincy, Massachusetts.

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## A Question of Power

Movies come and movies go, but probably never in the history of American film has more controversy greeted any movie than that which met Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* before and after its debut on Ash Wednesday. We all know what the controversy was about. It had nothing to do with the qualities of the film as film (it was average, as are all of Mr. Gibson's movies), the acting (with the possible but minor exception of the fellow who played Pontius Pilate, there was no acting to speak of), the dialogue (who can possibly tell, except the handful of philologists who could follow the Latin and Aramaic?), or the plot (depending on your religious views, either there was none or it was the Greatest Story Ever Told). The controversy had to do with whether Gibson's film was really antisemitic, and, while a good many Christians and gentiles said it was, the principal accusers along these lines were Jewish.

The Jewish attacks on *The Passion* were (no pun intended) catholic in their universality—they included Jews of the political left and Jews of the political right (or the neoconservatism that nowadays is called "right-wing"), devout Jews and secular Jews, religiously liberal Jews and religiously Orthodox Jews. One of the principal authors of the attacks was Abe Foxman, head of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, which is about as close to Orwell's Thought Police as anything that currently exists in this country. Mr. Foxman, to whom a script of the Gibson film was leaked long before it appeared in theaters, and who actually sneaked into a showing under false pretenses, was undoubtedly the movie's biggest enemy and played a major role in instigating other attacks. Richard Cohen of the *Washington Post*, who found the film "fascistic" (as well as "anti-Semitic"; Mr. Cohen may not make the distinction, but Mussolini certainly did), assured his readers that he really did not want to see it at all, but "I went to see it only as part of my job, wishing that the Anti-Defamation League and other critics had simply ignored it." Apparently, Mr. Cohen believes his job includes doing what the ADL tells him to do. He is certainly not

the only one.

The level of attacks was such that Sharon Waxman, the *New York Times* film reporter, ran a piece with the headline, "New Film May Harm Gibson's Career" on February 26, the day after the movie opened, and she quoted Jewish movie bigs David Geffen and Jeffrey Katzenberg of DreamWorks as telling her (each refused to speak for attribution), "It doesn't matter what I do. I will do something. I won't hire [Gibson]. I won't support anything he's part of. Personally that's all I can do." In Hollywood, of course, such modest efforts by major producers are more than enough to assist world-famous stars in making quick career transitions to working as pizza delivery boys.

Whatever the threats to Gibson's future employment by Mr. Geffen and/or Mr. Katzenberg, the debut of the film did not help much. Mr. Cohen was by no means the only Jewish critic who became what he called "uneasy" when he actually worked up the guts to go see it. "Dangerous," an editorial in the *New York Daily News* shuddered. "Unambiguously contrived to vilify Jews," Frank Rich wrote in the *New York Times*. Gibson "has chosen to give millions of people the impression that Jews are culpable for the death of Jesus," Leon Wieseltier concluded in the *New Republic*, while William Safire moaned about "Gibson's medieval version of the suffering of Jesus, reveling in savagery to provoke outrage and cast blame." Neoconservative Charles Krauthammer shrieked about "Gibson's Blood Libel" and found proof of the film's demonization of Jews in the lurking presence of the figure of Satan "merging with, indeed, defining the murderous Jewish crowd." Of course, as anyone who has seen the film knows, Satan is also "merging" with Jesus himself in the Garden of Gethsemane during the film's opening scenes, trying to prevent Him from going through with the crucifixion at all. The point is that Satan does not want God's Son to sacrifice Himself for mankind's sins, and, when Christ dies, Satan screams in rage and agony. In any case, who exactly would you expect Satan to be lurking among in downtown Jerusalem? They just didn't have too many



Palestinians back then.

Almost all of the commentary about *The Passion of the Christ's* supposed vilification of Jews was on the same sophomoric and transparently false level. Jami Bernard, film critic for the *New York Daily News*, opened her review of February 24 with the line, "Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* is the most virulently anti-Semitic movie made since the German propaganda films of World War II" and, a week later, was complaining about the "week of real hatred" she had endured from all the antisemitic Christians who wrote her what she called "nasty and unprintable letters."

If the nasty and unprintable attacks that critics such as Miss Bernard launched did not muzzle the movie, maybe the cops could do it. By early March, the *New York Post* reported, the head of the NYPD's "Hate Crimes Unit" ordered his squad to go see the film just in case, and, a few days later, a "Jewish advocacy group" calling itself the "Messiah Truth Project" asked the U.S. Department of Justice to "utilize civil, criminal, and federal hate crime laws" against the film. And you thought I was joking about the Thought Police.

There were, of course, eminent Jewish writers and critics who defended the movie, such as Rabbi Daniel Lapin, founder of Toward Tradition, a politically conservative Jewish organization, and Orthodox Jewish film critic Michael Medved; by far, however, the overwhelming response from Jewish journalists, film critics, Hollywood powerhouses, and the leaders and spokesmen of the organized Jewish community was, to put it mildly, negative.

It is not my purpose here to discuss in any detail the merits or flaws of their attacks. Not only Lapin and Medved but any number of Christian writers (Pat Buchanan, Joe Sobran, and Cal Thom-