

### Prose extract: 'I had plenty of leisure...'

I had plenty of leisure but it was the leisure of solitude for my Sundays was demanded to be spent in the fields at horse or cow tending my whole summer was one days employment as it were in the fields I grew so much into the quiet love of nature's presence that I was never easy but when I was in the fields passing my sabbaths and leisures with the shepherds and herd boys as fancies prompted sometimes playing at marbles on the smooth beaten sheep tracks or leap frog among the thimble hills sometimes ranging among the corn to get the red and blue flowers for cockades to play at soldiers or running into the woods to hunt strawberries or stealing peas in church time when the owners was safe to boil at the gipsys fire who went half shares at our stolen luxury we heard the bells chime but the fields was our church and we seemd to feel a religious feeling in our haunts on the sabbath while some old shepherd sat on a mole hill reading aloud some favourite chapter from an old fragment of a Bible which he carried in his pocket for the day a family relic which possessed on its covers and title pages in rude scrawls genealogies of the third and fourth Generations when aunts uncles and grandmothers dyd and when cousins etc were married and brothers and sisters born occupying all the blank leaves in the book and the title pages borders which leaves were preserved with a sacred veneration tho half the contents had been suffered to drop out and be lost

I loved this solitary disposition from a boy and felt a curiosity to wander about the spots were I had never been before I remember one incident of this feeling when I was very young it cost my parents some anxiety it was in summer and I started off in the morning to get rotten sticks from the woods but I had a feeling to wander about the fields and I indulgd it I had often seen the large heath called Emmonsales stretching its yellow furze from my eye into unknown solitudes when I went with the mere openers and my curiosity urged me to steal an opportunity to explore it that morning I had imagined that the worlds end was at the edge of the orison and that a days journey was able to find it so I went on with my heart full of hopes pleasures and discoveries expecting when I got to the brink of the world that I could look down like looking into a large pit and see into its secrets the same as I believed I could see heaven by looking into the water so I eagerly wandered on and rambled among the furze the whole day till I got out of my knowledge when the very wild flowers and birds seemd to forget me and I imagined they were the inhabitants of new countrys the very sun seemd to be a new one and shining in a different quarter of the sky still I felt no fear my wonder seeking happiness had no room for it I was finding new wonders every minute and was walking in a new world often wondering to my self that I had not found the end of the old one the sky still touchd the ground in the distance as usual and my childish wisdoms was puzzled in perplexitys night crept on before I had time to fancy the morning was bye when the white moth had begun to flutter beneath the bushes the black snail was out upon the grass and the frog was leaping across the rabbit tracks on his evening journeys and the little mice was nimbling about and twittering their little earpiercing song with the hedge cricket whispering the hour of waking spirits was at hand which made me hasten to seek home I knew not which way to turn but chance put me in the right track and when I got into my own fields I did not know them every thing seemd so different the church peeping over the woods could hardly reconcile me when I got home I found my parents in the greatest distress and half the village about hunting me one of the wood men in the woods had been killed by the fall of a tree and it served to strengthen their terrors that some similar accident had befallen myself as they often leave the oaks half cut down till the bark men can come up to pill them which if a wind happens to rise fall down unexpected

Clare wrote most of his prose autobiographical sketches in the early 1820s.

See *John Clare By Himself*. Edited by Eric Robinson and David Powell. Ashington and Manchester: MidNAG/Carcenet, 1996. 39–41.