

Literary and Historical Notes for Friday, July 13, 2007

It's the birthday of the poet **JOHN CLARE**, born in Nottinghamshire, England (1793), maybe the poorest person ever to become a major writer in English literature. His father was a peasant farmer. The family often had to live off the proceeds from a single apple tree in their yard. John Clare went to the village school between the ages of five and eleven. He learned to read and write and decided he wanted to write poetry.

Clare had to support himself as a farm laborer. As malnutrition had stunted his growth, he was never more than five feet tall and couldn't do heavy work. He mostly weeded and stacked hay bales and looked after animals. He couldn't afford to buy paper, so he made his own out of birch bark and made his own ink as well. Some of his poems were written on old envelopes.

Other romantic poets such as Wordsworth and Keats were writing nature poetry, but they wrote about nature as a metaphor for something, whereas John Clare always tried to write about nature as it was, the thing itself.

Clare's first book came out in 1820. The fact that he was a peasant helped to make the book a bestseller, but within a few years there was a bank crash, and a recession in England. His books sold fewer and fewer copies, and he eventually moved back to the farm.

John Clare wrote, "I live here among the ignorant like a lost man...they hardly dare talk in my company for fear I should mention them in my writings." And then he began to suffer from a psychiatric disorder. His behavior grew more and more erratic, and he saw things like spirits and demons. He was committed to an asylum where he forgot who he was. Sometimes he thought he was Lord Byron and wrote some poems in Byron's style. Clare escaped from the asylum at one point but was returned and lived there for the rest of his life.

John Clare wrote about 3,500 poems, of which only 400 were published in his lifetime, and his great importance as an English poet has become clear only in the last few decades.

It's the birthday of the short story writer **ISAAK BABEL**, born in Odessa, Ukraine (1894). He was the author of *Tales of Odessa*. In 1939, he was arrested by the Soviet secret police and the following January, after a 20-minute trial, he was executed in Moscow.

It was Isaac Babel who said, "There is no iron that can enter the human heart with such stupefying effect, as a period placed at just the right moment."

Water-Lilies

by John Clare

The water-lilies on the meadow stream
Again spread out their leaves of glossy green;
And some, yet young, of a rich copper gleam,
Scarce open, in the sunny stream are seen,
Throwing a richness upon Leisure's eye,
That thither wanders in a vacant joy;
While on the sloping banks, luxuriantly,
Tending of horse and cow, the chubby boy,
In self-delighted whims, will often throw
Pebbles, to hit and splash their sunny leaves;
Yet quickly dry again, they shine and glow
Like some rich vision that his eye deceives;
Spreading above the water, day by day,
In dangerous deeps, yet out of danger's way.

"Water-Lilies" by John Clare. Public Domain.

INSIDE PASSAGES by Holly Harden

The week or two before a big trip is always a trip in itself, and this time around things were no different. There were passports to deal with and forms to fill out, umbrellas and luggage and shoes to buy. Mail to put on hold, perishables to eat up, grandparents to make plans with for childcare issues. And packing, which began sometime last weekend, and during which my kids, who seemed a bit overwhelmed, asked, "Why are you going to Norway, anyway?"

Well. "Because there's a mountain in Norway I want to climb," I replied. They were quiet for a minute, then asked, "Why are you really going?" Which got me thinking. Why *am* I going to Norway? I'm not Norwegian, and have no long-lost relatives to seek out. I do like to get away now and then, but routine isn't painful and I rather like the landscape of my small town. I've been to Europe and have taken a cruise and a weekend on the North Shore this summer might have been just fine. And yes, I was asked to go, as part of my work, and was surprised and grateful and of course I'll go to Norway.

But the fact of the matter lies in something my mother often says when I'm venting about some issue. She listens a while, then gently reminds me, "Remember, ecstasy is just around the corner." And she's right. Thing is, in order to turn a corner, you've got to be up and moving. You can't just sit there on the porch swing your whole life and wait for ecstasy to show up. Sure, you'll see a lot of red pick-up trucks and wave to farmers pulling their hay wagons and chat with all kinds of neighbors. Mrs. Jungerberg might bring over a tin of molasses cookies or some beans from her garden, and the UPS guy is likely to bring you a surprise or two. A good storm

will roll in now and then, guaranteed, and once a year a parade will march on by. You'll find a lot of the glory in life right there on your porch swing, but if you don't hit the road now and then you'll never know what's out there beyond the railroad tracks.

I'M GOING TO NORWAY FOR ECSTASY, WHATEVER THAT MAY MEAN.

So there you have it. I'm going to Norway for ecstasy, whatever that may mean. It just may be waiting on that mountain I'll

climb. Or I might find it in Oslo, while drinking coffee near a window looking out on a street, or on a plate in the dining room of the ms Veendam, or in the third pew, right side, in a church in Bergen. It could show up in a conversation near a kiosk in a harbor, in the eyes of an old man whom I stop to ask for directions, or in the Crow's Nest as the band plays late in the night. Who knows. Norway's just around the corner, and your porch swing will be waiting for you when you get home.

Holly Harden is a writer from Minnesota who is leading a writing workshop during the cruise. She's all in favor of adventure.

My father mows the grass ~ a poem by Phebe Hansen ~

Dad's mower throws sprays of grass into the catcher summer evenings as we children lie on our backs, safe on the soft green he's already mowed.

Sometimes he pauses, then with surprising silliness, reaches down to grab great handfuls, throws them at us. We sputter and cry out in mock dismay,

but still continue telling each other ghost stories set in small town cemeteries, very much like the one across from our grade school or horror tales of

children who had pumped too high on the school swings with their dangerous chain links and gone over the bars into another dimension, never seen again,

off into the outer reaches of the sky, way beyond the Big Dipper, into ether that swallowed them more completely than that other ether Doctor Dordahl used

when he laid us on his operating table to remove our adenoids and tonsils. Then we fall into silence and wonder as a shower of stars shoots across the sky.

From Why Still Dance, ©Nodin Press, 2003. Printed with author's permission. Phebe, PHC's Norway Cruise Poet Laureate, will be back toward the end of our cruise with another poem for you.

POSTCARD FROM MRS. SUNDBERG by Mrs. Sundberg

Everyone's taking off this time of year, and I've gotten more calls from friends traveling abroad for the first time. They want to know what to expect, and while I'm not Amelia Earhart, I've had a few adventures of my own.

When you leave your hometown, and sometimes even your home, you're pretty much vacating your comfort zone. That's fine. Acknowledge it, and keep moving. It'll be there when you return.

Don't set yourself up. Every adventure has its glitches. You've got to figure in weather, seating assignments, delays, communication issues, luggage problems, and other people's moods. And when you get where you're going, you very well may miss the sunset. Which isn't the end

of the world. There's always another one, and in the meantime you can get yourself a drink with one of those little umbrellas in it and look for the moon.

DON'T SET YOURSELF UP. EVERY ADVENTURE HAS ITS GLITCHES.

The food is different. The music and landscape and language and smells are different. That is a good thing. Get to know some people and you'll find you have things in common. Nothing served to you on a plate is inedible. At least try it, for God's sake. And you're not the only one who might be lost.

Remember— you've landed in another culture. People are different.

FIELD NOTES

"Give it to the Norwegian. She'll eat anything." by Rich MacDonald

When I was a boy growing up in the 1970s, I remember seeing a television commercial for Life breakfast cereal. Three little boys, sitting around the breakfast table, the elder two staring suspiciously at the new box of cereal. One poured a bowl and the other said, "Give it to Mikey, he'll eat anything."

One year a new girl came to the Lewiston-Porter school system, a stereotypically blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty by the name of Gröm. Growing up in Western New York, we were a Wonder Bread community; we did not like things to change (hmm, sounds a bit like Lake Wobegon). I will never forget the first day she came to school and for lunch she had a jar of pickled herring. Ewww! And then I tried it. To this day, I love pickled herring!

She told me stories of eating every imaginable creature from the shore and the sea, and many unimaginable ones, too. I know that she shared with me some recipes, but those are lost to the dark recesses of time.

A friend who lived in Norway for nearly

eleven years, Mark, once described a recipe for cormorant: put one dressed cormorant in a 10-quart pot of water. Add vegetables, herbs, and spices to taste. Throw in two rocks. Boil until the rocks are soft. Discard the cormorant. Eat the rock.

If Gröm ate like that, no wonder she was so tough.

What's in a whale name? by Natalie Springuel

What do a "spekkhogger" and a "staurkval" have in common? Both are Norwegian names for the killer whale, commonly also known in English as "Orca," and both reflect a common practice throughout the world of naming animals based on their behavior or appearance. Though Orcas have inspired a misplaced fear in humans for generations, the name "Killer Whale" comes from the fact that some populations of these animals kill and eat whales, not humans. "Spekkhogger," or blubber cutter, refers to killer whales attacking baleen whales that have thick layers of blubber to insulate them from cold ocean waters. Though the name "Spekkhogger" is local to Norway, the killer whale populations off the Norwegian coast feed primarily on

That's why we have maps.

When I travel, I like to think of myself as an ambassador from my home town. I try to be positive, courteous, open-minded and patient, but sometimes I slip. Anxiety is a trip in itself. And that's where good planning comes in. Whatever else you pack, include a good book, hard candy, and aspirin. And splurge on new underwear. Trust me on this one.

See the *Prairie Home Companion* web site www.prairiehome.org for the regular column, "A View From Mrs. Sundberg's Window," along with a multitude of recipes to bring ease and delight into your kitchen.



herring. Why the name then? Norwegians, whale hunters themselves, witnessed killer whales pack-hunting baleen whales during their own hunting forays for whales in Antarctic waters. As for the name "staurkval," it means "pole whale," and refers to the whale's long dorsal fin — the longest dorsal fin of any species of whale.

"Rorquals," a Norwegian term meaning "tube whale," are the group of baleen whales equipped with grooves or pleats in their throats. These grooves, which look much like inflatable tubes, expand as the whale gulps vast quantities of water to sift out plankton and small fish. The sei whale, a type of Rorqual, got its name from the Norwegian word "seje" for pollock, a close relative of the cod. When the sei whales arrived off the coast of Norway to feed on plankton, fishermen always knew the pollock were close behind. If the pollock arrived first, then the whale hunters kept a look out for the sei.

Meet the APHC naturalist staff on the Navigation Deck in the morning for wildlife observations and on the Lido Deck every afternoon for natural history interpretation. Check HAL schedules for the most recent updates.

THE BOOK NOOK by Marcia Pankake

All the Facts You'll Ever Need

Living in Norway: Patricia Crinion Bjaaland's Classic Guide for New Residents., 3rd ed.

by Michael Brady and Belinda Drabble
Oslo: Palamedes Press, 1999. 412 pp.

Much more informative than the conventional guidebook, Bjaaland's guide is almost a reference book, giving a piecemeal but thorough overview of Norway through facts. For instance, Norway has twelve times more suicides than murders, 408 cars per 1000 people, the 17th highest car ownership in the world, 25 of the world's 100 longest tunnels out of its total of 820 road tunnels — of which 17 run under water. Vikings built their ships balancing maximum stability with minimum friction. Norway stands second to the USA in per capita spending on savory snacks and third in the world on eating sweets and chocolate. Children received middle names only after about 1970.

This book is a vademecum for anyone planning to spend some time in Norway.

Marcia Pankake is a retired librarian and long time editor of *Prairie Home* publications. She also heads up the bookgroup. Look for more installments of The Book Nook.

You Are Invited to submit your take on things for publication in the Ballast's "Passenger Notes" section.

Write about where you're from, or how you got here, something that surprises you or charms you or makes you miss your kids. Drop it off at the HAL front desk, along with your name and cabin number.

Submissions will be picked up daily around 4:00 p.m., and though we can't include everything, we'll give it our best shot. ~The Editors ~

VIKING NEWS by Christina von Nolcken

Some Vikings, like Thorolf and Egil in ch. 46 of *Egil's Saga*, were professionals, setting off on their raids as soon as the weather allowed:

In the spring they started getting a big longship ready. Once it was manned they went plundering that summer in the Baltic, won a great deal of loot and fought a good number of battles. They sailed all the way to Courland and lay there at anchor for two weeks of peaceful trading. Then they started plundering again." (tr. Hermann Pálsson and Paul Edwards)

But many were more like the twelfth-century Norse chieftain, Svein Asleifsson, who lived on the Isle of Orkney and for whom Viking raids represented a kind of vacation:

He would go off plundering in the Hebrides and in Ireland on what he called his 'spring-trip'; then back home just after midsummer, where he stayed till the cornfields had been reaped and the grain was safely in. After that he would go off raiding again, and never came back till the first month of winter was ended. This he called his 'autumn-trip'.

The example and translation from Orkneying Saga is from R. Chartrand et al., *The Vikings: Voyagers of Discovery and Plunder* (2006), pp. 15-16.

Christina von Nolcken is the PHC Norway Cruise Viking expert. Look for more installments of this regular column.



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