



## INTRODUCTION

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Carol Klein

I wonder if, when Clare Leighton and her partner Noel Brailsford took on their garden in the early thirties, she had any idea of the fact that recording its progress, documenting its changes and passing on her observations of what would happen within its 'Four Hedges', would occupy as much of her time as reorganising its borders and scything its grass.

It was to become a major part of her life. Though it must have been hard to follow the digging by drawing, to form sentences and paragraphs about what had just been finished when she came in from a hard day's work, her hands blue with cold and covered in mud, or her dress wet with sweat from scything the orchard.

Not only are her observations on how things happen in the garden generic (anything closely observed and accurately reported is bound to have pertinence), but they are tempered with an enormous respect for all she sees.

She acknowledges the magic and dispels the mystique. There is no argument about what she describes, you trust her implicitly. Nowhere does she profess to 'know' about gardening. At every step she acknowledges that she is finding out and she fills you with the desire to do the same, to jump in and partake.

Fellow gardeners will recognise so many of the sentiments she expresses and identify with the activities she describes. Who hasn't drooled over bulb catalogues and then imagined, having placed an order, that the job is done and the bulbs will plant themselves.

The time and the context of the world that Clare describes have gone forever. On one level her book is a historical document, a record of the practices in gardening and farming in a Chiltern village in the early thirties, and yet her subject matter is timeless, an enduring record, as urgent as the work that needs to be done today.

I have admired Clare Leighton's woodcuts for many years. A couple of reproductions have been amongst my most treasured possessions, probably removed from one of her books and pasted onto card by some unscrupulous bookseller, they have delighted me nonetheless, pinned up in easy view on a year planner and removed and repinned when December gives way to January. Though their style is easy to date, the cut of a jacket, the sweep of a line, there is a timelessness about them. These men planting a tree, one with a long apron, both with flat caps, neither with gloves, may be stereotypical of 1930s rural workers but they have the essence of men planting trees that stretches back to the first time a tree was planted and all the subsequent times this noble activity has been undertaken and will be again. The landscape that encompasses them is ageless too, thin soil stretched over the spine of a sleeping giantess, a knoll of trees iconic on the close horizon, immediate yet eternal under a windswept sky.

I had no idea who had made these uncompromising images, permeated by the earth. I did not even know that it was a woman who had created this magic, though there is a huge empathy and admiration for those she portrays, human, animal and plant, that leads you to feel a loving female hand was responsible. There is much of the mother, the nurturer, in her writing. Images in word and picture are often cradled.

I had never read her writing until I was asked to write this introduction, but having read just a few pages I cried. Don't get the wrong impression. This is not sentimental or slushy stuff, it has to

do with the power of the goddess. Every syllable, every scoop of the chisel, exudes Mother Earth.

The story of Clare's garden has no beginning, middle or end. That is what separates it from so much garden-writing, where ultimately most titles have conclusions. That is not to say that there is anything unformed, random or ill-considered about it: no room for accidents or eccentricities, only a massive respect for nature as it happens and an acknowledgement of its order, pattern and predestination. There is the strong, organic form in her imagery that permeates all natural processes. Art, like gardening, is an artificial activity, but at its best it can extract the essence from whatever it seeks to portray.

There must be all sorts of reasons for writing a book. *Four Hedges* is a labour of love. It feels as though Clare Leighton had no other option than to write and illustrate it. She had to record the arrival of the swallows, she had to describe the monochrome simplicity of a new dawn and within it the clarity of the song of the first thrush and she had to share its secrecy with her reader. It becomes a special secret between the two of us. No matter how many people have read and will read this book everyone will feel that she is speaking directly to them, showing them the sweep of the reaper's arm, helping them feel the weight of the apples, how the grass smelt, how cleggy the earth felt. There are moments of astonishment, deep joy and humour. Who wouldn't identify with pulling off the gardening gloves, the better to get to grips with the soil, to feel it and love it, abandoning not just gloves but all the inhibition and restraint that deny the very visceral experience of gardening. Without being subjected to any deliberate manifesto we are persuaded, we want to join the cause. We yearn to find in our own garden the wonder Claire elevates from the familiar.

Clare Leighton's melodious writing, coupled with the percussion of her uncompromising woodcuts, strikes a chord which resonates

not just immediately but for ever. Phrases and images fill you with delight and months, years later, stick with you. Though I have only recently been lucky enough to read her writing, I know that it will stay always. Such is the joy you feel when experiencing her writing you immediately think you must persuade others unacquainted with her work to enrich their lives by reading this book and to do it straight away.

As you read each word, as you study each line, you smile. Yes, you want to say, yes, yes, you want to shout, that's it! That is how the blackbird sits on her nest as if to make sure that no breath of air, not even a fine feather's breadth, could squeeze between the curved wall of her nest and know the secret of the precious eggs that lie beneath her warm and patient body.

*Four Hedges* is documentation of the highest order. Clare's power of observation is razor sharp, direct and unremitting – but it is much more. It is tempered always with love and an enormous joy in being able to experience whatever she is telling us about.

This is the most honest writing I have ever read. There is no sophistry, no attempt to say something clever. No doubt there was frustration, no doubt difficulties, rewriting and editing can be irksome even debilitating, but if so it doesn't show. There is no loss of energy and momentum. Even when the subject she is describing is subtle, her words respect its nuances and recognise its life force. The writing and the images have an immediacy that is as fresh as the first primrose. Both Clare's parents were accomplished writers and no doubt the rigours of writing were part of her consciousness long before she herself moved into authorship.

Making a woodcut defies shilly-shallying, you can't fudge. In painting (especially in oils) and drawing there is room for manoeuvre, the opportunity to change your mind. Not when you are engraving. Commitment is essential and Clare's writing echoes

that commitment. It is as incisive and immediate as her images, so fresh you feel it was you who crouched down to come face to face with a frog, you who heard the ironstone dragged along the blade of the scythe with long, slow strokes and felt the edge of the blade, sharp and shiny in the hot summer sun.

Her image of a vegetable marrow tells you everything about the life of the plant and so much more, the swelling fruit lurking underneath the vast leaves, the flowers newly opened, as ephemeral as any flower could be and yet for their moment as strong and substantial as the leaves that surround them.

How could she capture this process, this life, in a medium that entails the accumulation of cut after cut after cut, of incredible patience and hour upon hour of painstaking work. Her confidence and self belief shine through and it rubs off on the reader. But her art is artless.

*Four Hedges* is not an instruction manual on how to garden. Nobody will turn to it to find out when to sow their broad beans or how widely to space their potatoes. Clare was learning as she went in the only real way any gardener can – by experiment and trial and error, but she did so with a fervour and determination that inspires the faint-hearted and galvanises the most hesitant into feverish activity. The great gift of her writing and illustration is its ability to lift us all into another domain, one full of wonderment and magic. Her work reminds us of our place in the overall picture, at one with the earth and full of wonder and joy to be born of it and to engage with it.

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