

JOHN CROME AND THE IDEA OF MOUSEHOLD

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SUMMARY

John Crome's painting of Mousehold Heath in the Tate Gallery is examined against current ideas of landscape and the picturesque and in the light of associationist theory; Crome painted a tract of barren heath which his contemporaries would have seen as dreary and unproductive. Pressure to enclose Mousehold began about 1783 and the major part was enclosed from 1799 onwards. Crome's picture, some twenty years later in date, gives no hint of enclosure but instead celebrates uncluttered space. This idea of immensity has theological implications. The painting remained unappreciated until changing ideas, in particular the new enthusiasm for moorland scenery fostered by George Borrow among others, permitted its reappraisal.

The stylistic features and formal qualities of John Crome's paintings have traditionally been given more attention than their subject matter or possible wider meanings. In the past an emphasis on connoisseurship was only natural, given the problems of authenticity and the need to disentangle Crome's undoubted work from that of pupils, imitators, or deliberate fakers; even now there remain disputed paintings and many whose exact dating is uncertain. By contrast the subject content may seem straightforward. While Crome was no topographical artist in the narrow sense, concerned only with the accurate portrayal of a given spot, his starting point was still the local scene. The subjects he painted could be identified on the ground. His iconography, rural or urban, appears unambiguous. To the casual view his landscapes hardly seem to demand subtle readings but simply invite a generous aesthetic response.

For Crome and his contemporaries the matter was rather more complex. Take for example William Taylor's statement to the Norwich Philosophical Society in a lecture on the history and theory of landscape painting, delivered most likely early in 1814:

A work of art, a painted prospect, delights, either (1) directly, as an imitation of nature; or (2) indirectly, as a nucleus of association. One part of the pleasure is derived from the sensations excited by inspection; one part of the pleasure is derived from the ideas excited by association. In proportion as these sensations, or as these ideas, are vivid and interesting, is the effect and merit of the work.¹

Crome, who was a member of the Philosophical Society and surely present on the occasion of this lecture (some months before he started out for France), would not have quarrelled with Taylor's assertion that the expressiveness of a landscape painting depends as much on its power of stimulating trains of thought as on the skilful representation of nature. For more than half a century the theory of association had been a dominant force in philosophical and psychological thought.² Besides much else it provided theoretical backing for the widespread belief that the fine arts were capable of exerting a beneficial moral influence on both individuals and society at large.³ Furthermore it chimed in with the classical doctrine of a reciprocal relationship between the visual arts and fine literature, *ut pictura poesis*. It is highly relevant that Crome's own son, John Berney Crome, delivered a paper to the Philosophical Society on this very topic and 'created no

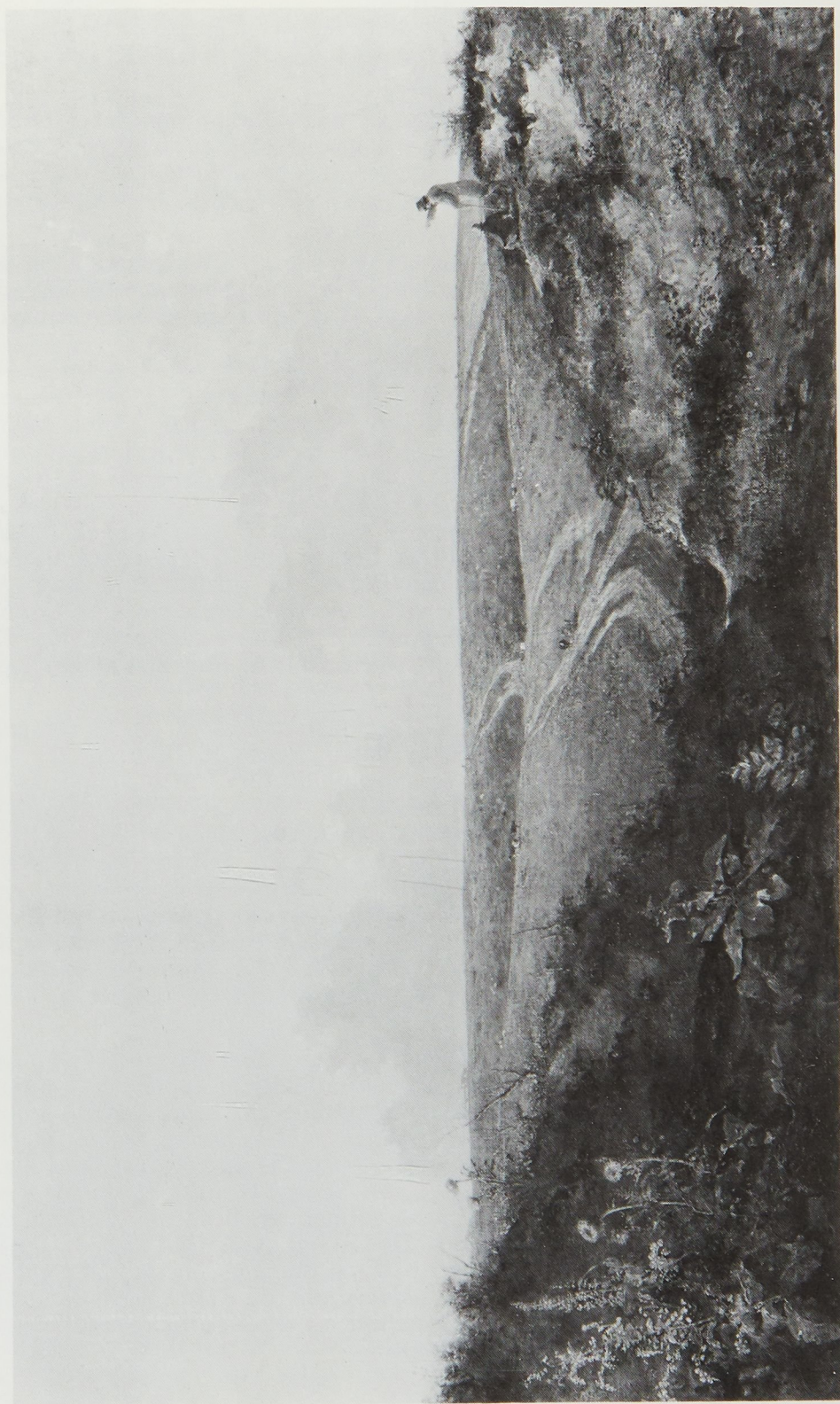


Plate I
John Crome *Mousehold Heath* (Tate Gallery, oil, 43 $\frac{1}{4}$ x71 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.)

small sensation': he 'drew his parallel between the sister muses of poetry and painting, and so beautifully did he work out his subject as to leave an entrancing effect upon a numerous and educated audience'.⁴

William Taylor had explained that for him the highest form of prospect painting was in fact townscape, since here the associations of historical events and human activity were experienced at their most intense. But he admitted too the many associations of rural landscape, citing the words of another well-known Norwich *littérateur*, of the period, Frank Sayers:

The beauty of landscapes arises from the ideas of peace, of health, of rural happiness, of pleasing solitude, of simple manners, of classical imagery, connected with the groups of trees, with the lawns, and fields, and water, which enter into their composition.⁵

It is, Taylor added, 'by a greater command over these associated ideas that the painter sometimes makes a greater impression than the reality he represents

The passage of time since Crome's surviving works were painted has fundamentally altered their significance. We experience them now in historical – and art historical – perspective, as documents of an already fairly remote past whose values and modes of perception differed significantly from our own. But while we cannot observe these pictures in exactly the same way as Crome's fellow-citizens did, we may come a little closer by bearing in mind the importance of associationism in evaluating landscape painting of the period. As a means of testing this approach, the present article will focus on a single work by Crome, the large painting of *Mousehold Heath* now in the Tate Gallery; and the aim will be to tease out some of the meanings, conscious or not, that it may have had for the artist.

Though one of his most impressive and personal landscapes, this is formally very straightforward and uncomplicated by detail. Nearly halfway up, the six-foot-wide canvas is bisected, as in many seventeenth-century Dutch compositions, by a long and almost unbroken horizon. Above this Crome has painted a magnificently atmospheric sky, with a bank of cumulus rising to the right and a flock of large birds wheeling high in the upper centre and left. Below is the darker undulating ground. A hillock in the left foreground is enlivened with wild flowers. On another mound to the right are two men, probably cowherds, seen mainly from behind; one of them points into the distance where cattle graze and several isolated buildings can be seen. As so often with Crome, a prominent track winds away into the picture. Far along it towards the horizon a figure may just be discerned.

Most of the ideas associated with country scenery that William Taylor and Frank Sayers mentioned are present here: the tranquillity of a summer's evening, agreeable retirement, rural innocence, wholesomeness, even perhaps some evocation of Arcady. These may all be regarded as associations typical of the city-dweller charmed by the notion of escape from the complexities and oversophistication of urban living. But Taylor and Sayers, it must be noted, were drawing attention specifically to the connotations of meadows, woods, and quiet rivers, essentially bucolic landscapes. That is not at all what Crome painted in *Mousehold Heath*. His subject, however pastoral the gloss, was actually a tract of barren waste, and the contemporary associations of wastes were far from agreeable. The adjective William Windham chose to describe them was 'mean'. His diary entry of 24 June 1788 is worth quoting:

There is such a dearth of objects, and poverty of ideas, in the ride from Cossey hither [i.e. to Aylsham], as makes me always think of it with dissatisfaction, though it has happened generally, in fact, that I have found it tolerably cheerful. It has been the thought of what I was going to, or the impression of what I have left, that has protected me from the mean associations which pightels and gorse commons, Stratton and Felthorpe, naturally draw with them. The parts are, perhaps, not numerous, in which twenty miles could be taken producing so few objects worthy of attention, or so little chance of meeting anything not connected with the spot on which it is found.⁶

Unlike the man-made countryside of arable and improved pasture, parkland and grove, in which 'the useful is everywhere blended with the beautiful',⁷ heathlands failed to conjure up pictures of rustic pleasures, Virgilian harmony, or – as fertile agricultural scenes tended to do – national prosperity. Rather they were experienced as blots on the landscape, disgracefully unproductive deserts, dreary wildernesses that offered, as Samuel Johnson put it, no 'entertainment' for the mind: 'The phantoms which haunt a desert are want, and misery, and danger; the evils of dereliction rush upon the thoughts . . .'.⁸

Maps of the period and the reports of agricultural surveyors like William Marshall (1787 and 1795), Nathaniel Kent (1796), and Arthur Young (1804) reveal just how much commonland and waste still existed in Norfolk at this time in spite of the county's lauded improvements in farming and development of marginal lands. Arthur Young found himself particularly incensed by the sight of Breckland:

Nothing can cause more surprise in the minds of many strangers on their first visiting Norfolk, than to find, on entering the county by Brandon or Thetford, a long stage of 18 miles to Swaffham, through a tract which deserves to be called a desert: a region of warren or sheep-walk, scattered with a scanty cultivation, yet highly improveable. This is a capital disgrace to the county, and has been the result of an absurd prejudice in favour of these old heaths for sheep.⁹

Mousehold Heath, seen in this light, was equally disgraceful. A late sixteenth-century survey had denoted its boundaries as Pockthorpe, Catton, Rackheath, Salhouse, Ranworth, South Walsham, North Burlingham, Blofield, Postwick and Thorpe. The occasion of this survey, the court action of 1587 succeeded in curtailing enclosure of the heath on any large scale for the next two centuries, though the open fields around it were gradually fenced. Only the Woodbastwick enclosure of 1767 made any significant inroad before 1800, so that the area could still be identified on the map in Marshall's *Rural Economy of Norfolk* (1787) as 'Extensive Heath', occupying a broad stretch from Norwich almost to Hoveton Broad.¹⁰ Much of it had been put to use as summer pasture for sheep in the fold-course system. There was little tree cover, for the light woodland which had once covered the area (and given its name to the Chapel of St. William in the Wood and perhaps also to Mosswold or Mousehold itself) had long been felled for building materials and fuel. The poor from the surrounding parishes still exploited the heath for fuel, bedding, and wild food; livestock were afforded rough grazing (though decline in the local textile industry had reduced the flocks and almost ended the fold-course); near Norwich were marl- and chalk-pits, a gravel quarry, and several windmills: but to the progressive late-eighteenth-century eye Mousehold simply cried out for improvement.

Nationally the movement for agricultural change and the enclosure of unproductive land was at its height during the period 1760-1820. This was a time of developing country estates, when a breed of scientific farmers were experi-



Plate II
Detail showing the extent of Mousehold from William Faden's *Topographical Map of the County of Norfolk* (London, 1797)

menting with new crops and methods, when agricultural societies were springing up, and when high prices for cereal crops were encouraging the swing from pastoral to arable farming. In Norfolk the establishment of the Agricultural Society in 1774 and the Holkham Sheep-shearings (which, *pace* the name, were more concerned with crops than animals) were part of the same trend.¹¹

The beginnings of agitation for the enclosure of Mousehold may be dated from about 1783 when a correspondent to the *Norwich Mercury* first drew public attention to 'this disgraceful heath'.¹² The same year Chase's *Norwich Directory* came out with the suggestion that a section of Mousehold might be adopted as a burial ground, so permitting the overcrowded city churchyards to be turned into 'handsome grass plats [i.e. plots], both for use and ornament'. Calls for action over Mousehold henceforth ran parallel with demands for improvements to the city itself. If the barren waste reaching almost to the edge of Norwich seemed an affront to polished urban values, so too did old-fashioned, unpaved and unlit streets, cluttered open spaces, and inadequate civic amenities. Chase indeed listed as many as twenty desirable improvements that included the widening, paving and naming of streets, modifications to the water supply, and removal of the medieval gates — which had become 'a nuisance, that smells rank in the nose of modern improvements'.¹³ Some of these proposed changes gradually came about and were noted with satisfaction in Peck's and Berry's directories of 1802 and 1810. Meanwhile a public meeting held in 1800 to consider the better paving, cleaning, lighting, and watching of the city eventually led to the passing of an act of Parliament for these ends.

Before 1800 only one recent development had affected Mousehold directly: the demolition of the ruinous Hasset's Hall (otherwise known as Monks' Grange) on its south-western boundary and the erection on the same site of an imposing brick cavalry barracks in 1792-3. (The old sheepfold-yard was also obliterated in the process.) This use of Mousehold for military purposes was of course nothing new. Woodforde, who recorded a visit to the barracks under construction in June 1793, had for example watched the dragoons manoeuvring on the heath sixteen years earlier.¹⁴

In 1792 an anonymous pamphlet was published, *An Essay on Wastes in general and on Mossfold in particular*. Its author, traditionally believed to be Henry Kett of Dickleburgh, argued strongly in favour of enclosure. Wastelands, he observed, were like primitive man, abject and barbarous; every delay in bringing them under cultivation was to be regretted. The more land given over to crops and plantations, the quicker could wealth be created for general benefit, the lower would be the cost of bread and other commodities, and the greater the population that might be supported. Although it was right that the rural poor should be compensated for their loss of commonage, in fact they benefited relatively little from wastes in their present state. Much of Mousehold was mere heath, Kett continued, yet the presence there of good-quality loam and clay, with marl available nearby, suggested it could be highly productive: 'vegetation would immediately thrive and crown the wishes of the parties with laurels of well earned gain'. Some parts might be left as sheepwalks and a fraction set aside to benefit the poor, but the remainder of this dreary useless waste ought to be put to work, the 'yet stagnant juices of this palsied giant' made to circulate.

Kett's case for enclosure was reinforced by another persuasive voice, that of John Wagstaff, who urged the improvement of Mousehold on the newly formed Board of Agriculture. He had first sent his proposals to the United Friars, a private discussion society in Norwich well known for its interest in progressive

ideas and practical philanthropy. But though the Friars considered Wagstaff's communication on three separate occasions in the autumn of 1792, they felt unable to decide on the plan's merits for lack of factual evidence, and so took the idea no further.¹⁵

Wagstaff found a better opportunity for publicity two years later when Nathaniel Kent, on behalf of the Board of Agriculture, circulated the preliminary version of his *General View of the Agriculture of Norfolk*. This was printed with wide margins so that readers could insert their own comments on the text and, if they wished, submit them to the Board. Wagstaff had already communicated with its members on the subject of Mousehold and contented himself with a few further remarks which duly appeared in the definitive edition of Kent's work in 1796. Having expressed his 'ardent wish to see the extended waste Moswold cultivated', he went on to discuss the matter of compensation for those who would be dispossessed.

I was thinking that in inclosing it, that it might be a subject of policy, as well as justice, to appropriate for the cottage poor, solely, a common, from thirty to forty acres, to each parish; this would be a sacrifice that might bespeak their acquiescence, and appease a possible disposition to turbulence. These concessions, I conceive, would not be a twentieth part of the whole; perhaps what is in the precincts of Norwich, may have a rental reserved for an annual distribution to its poor inhabitants.¹⁶

In view of the still widespread Jacobinism in the Norwich area at this date, Wagstaff's caution was understandable. Other writers felt a similar need to allay misgivings about the effect of enclosure on the rural poor. For instance 'Rusticus' — who published a series of seven letters on the value of enclosure in the *Norfolk Chronicle*¹⁷ — spent half his space explaining the ways in which the poor would benefit. They would gain through having regular agricultural employment, by the reduced cost of provisions and improved opportunities for gleaning at harvest-time, and by access to better fuel (timber, or even coal, instead of turf, gorse and heather). Under existing arrangements they suffered hardship and want, were often dependent on parish relief, and sometimes ended in the workhouse. Enclosure brought clear advantages to the rural poor as much as to the urban poor, to the farmers and landowners, and to the country at large.

Two further articles on the cultivation of wastes appeared in the radical Norwich magazine, *The Cabinet*, in 1794-5.¹⁸ Even though the second of these is signed 'Rusticus' (identifiable as Thomas Starling Norgate), it is by no means certain that the author is the same as the correspondent to the Tory *Norfolk Chronicle*. While some of the arguments are similar, Rusticus II admits that his are controversial. He also insists on the need to allot and divide enclosures more equitably than was often done; better not enclose at all, he warns, than simply swell the aristocracy and destroy the bulwark of the peasantry.

In spite of such reservations — or even expressed opposition from some quarters¹⁹ — the major part of Mousehold was enclosed from 1799 onwards. At a liberal estimate the heath covered tracts of fifteen parishes,²⁰ but principally Thorpe, Sprowston, Little Plumstead, Rackheath and Salhouse. As regards these five, the Rackheath Enclosure Act was passed in 1799 and the others in 1800. The Thorpe enclosure was the most crucial for Norwich. The process of the Thorpe bill, the labours of the five commissioners consequent on the Act, and the final award and division took until July 1801, though certain results were visible by February of that year when the proposed allotments were ploughed and staked round to allow inspection.²¹ On 4 April 1801 the *Norwich Mercury* reported that the enclosure of Mousehold

which so long employed the minds of speculative men in calculating its probable advantages, has at length commenced, and is rapidly proceeding. We understand that considerable allotments under the Thorpe Bill have been sold for sums, which, on the usual average of computing the value of similar purchases, would amount to an annual rent of 25 shillings per acre. It is devoutly to be wished, that in appropriating the immense tracts of hitherto-barren soil now inclosing to the uses of cultivation, a due attention may have been paid to a race of men who were once our 'country's pride' but who are now almost annihilated by the inordinate grasp of more wealthy agriculturalists, grown rich upon the spoliation of their humbler neighbours – We allude to the occupiers of small farms.

Under the terms of the Thorpe Act²² a major allotment was made to the Dean and Chapter of the Cathedral in respect of their former rights in Pockthorpe. Much of this land – which included the so-called shooting ground – was already on lease to tenant farmers (notably, at this time, John Clement Ives) and continued to be so. Freeholders and copyholders of Pockthorpe similarly maintained their right to pasture, though not to fold, their sheep and cattle. Among other beneficiaries of the award were Thomas Vere Chute (Lord of the Manor of Thorpe-with-Plumstead), the Earl of Rosebery, and Jehosaphat Postle (future President of the East Norfolk Agricultural Society). The dispossessed poor had to be satisfied with a small allotment to the value of 40 acres of commonland per annum; should this land be leased, its rent was to be spent on fuel for distribution. Lastly there were provisions in the award for public clay-, marl-, chalk- and gravel-pits, and for the creation of the usual roads with ditches, banks and fences. None of this seems to have been seriously contested – unlike the awards in the neighbouring parish of Rackheath which gave rise to an action of trespass at the Thetford Assizes in August 1801.²³ With similar awards in adjoining parishes, the result was a much changed landscape of straightened boundaries, large rectangular and gated fields, arable cropping with a little picturesque woodland,²⁴ and rather lonely farms. By 1814 enclosure was largely complete, though it was already recognised that some parts of the Heath might never be fully cultivated.²⁵

John Crome could not have escaped the arguments over enclosure, nor missed the practical consequences. As many as 38 different acts were obtained for Norfolk during the three years 1799-1801 when Mousehold itself began to be enclosed; all but one affected parishes south of a line joining Downham Market and North Walsham.²⁶ The local press was forever printing enclosure news: details of acts and awards, notices of appeals, announcements of the perambulation of boundaries, the staking of plots, the setting out of new roads. As Crome travelled about the countryside to attend his drawing pupils, he must often have come across evidence of fresh boundaries and fences, diversions of roads, and changes in land use. Some of his visits would have taken him to improved estates. His friend and first employer, Dr. Edward Rigby, was a keen improver. At the time Crome worked for him, Rigby was already busy planting his property at Framingham and blotting out the view of 'an ugly uninteresting heath' with a belt of trees; and in 1800 the Poringland/Framingham enclosure gave Rigby an opportunity to extend his estate by another hundred acres.²⁷ He published pamphlets on Framingham and Holkham (originally given as a paper to the Philosophical Society), and though neither of these was in John Crome's impressive little library at the time of his death, the artist did own a copy of Kent's work on Norfolk agriculture with the comments about Mousehold.²⁸

Because Crome was familiar with the case for enclosure, it does not of course follow that he necessarily approved it, particularly the enclosure of Mousehold.

His own family origins were after all working-class. His social status as an artist remained ambiguous, hovering between gentleman and artisan. At elections he voted with the Whigs. From what we know of his sociable character, his sympathies with the poor would not have been lessened by the relative improvement in his own position. Moreover, even those who advocated enclosure would sometimes admit that the poor might suffer as a consequence.²⁹ In private Crome may well have held, with Cobbett, that enclosure was a form of class robbery played according to the loaded rules of property ownership. His Tate Gallery *Mousehold Heath*, painted fifteen to twenty years after the parliamentary acts, gives no hint that the land has been enclosed. Open heath still extends as far as the eye can see and appears to be unbounded. The rough track vanishing into the distance is no road set out by the commissioners. There is not a sign of cultivation or planting. Instead the image is pastoral, with the whole composition transmitting a powerful feeling of empty space, timelessness, and freedom. Yet for Crome and his Norfolk contemporaries the associations of Mousehold with enclosure were now strong and unavoidable. By suppressing any overt reference to agricultural improvement, by choosing this particular prospect, the artist has in fact intensified the nostalgic and idealizing character of the painting. At the same time this unusually panoramic view and uncluttered composition shows something of Crome's deeper intentions. Here he is not so much concerned with the direct observation of a particular landscape, nor even with its purely aesthetic or picturesque qualities. He is rather feeling towards a new register of his art, the expression of sublimity.³⁰

Most Norwich School painting, Crome's not excepted, falls into the broad category of the 'naturalistic picturesque'.³¹ The time of its stylistic development around 1800 marked the high point of picturesque theory, when its chief proponents – William Gilpin, Uvedale Price, Richard Payne Knight – were at their most influential. If the theorists failed to agree on every detail, their principal message was clear enough. The picturesque was to be considered an aesthetic category quite distinct from the beautiful and the sublime. In landscape its distinguishing features were complexity of organisation, variety of incident, unexpectedness, irregularity, asymmetry, roughness of texture, strong chiaroscuro, variegated colour. Its preference was for objects rich in associations – old trees and rustic bridges, ruined castles and tumbledown cottages, ancient ways, winding rivers and romantic valleys. The scenery need not be wild, but it had to be essentially natural; if man-made, not obviously modern or utilitarian. Open heath and moorland hardly qualified, however, especially if the terrain were flat, because these tended to be drearily uniform and weak in suggestive power. In his published tours, Gilpin nearly always reacted negatively to this type of country. Passing from Houghton to Holkham over 'furzy downs' and sheepwalks, he noted that the many flocks of sheep 'gave some life to a country, otherwise uninteresting', but further south, after Blickling:

. . . the heaths soon prevail; and become both foreground, and distance without any variety. The road leads between the bare mounds of new-inclosed commons; nor does the eye find anything to rest on, till within a mile of Norwich. At that distance a grand view presents itself of the town, lying on a gentle declivity, stretching over a large compass of ground; and adorned with several towers, and spires.³²

Norfolk had its own writers and practitioners of the picturesque. Humphry Repton, who engaged in polemics with Uvedale Price on the subject, created a number of picturesque designs for local estates, though not all were realised.³³ As his remarks on Sir William Jerminham's seat at Costessey indicate,³⁴ he was

acutely aware of the associative or emblematic value of landscape. His proposals for Philip Martineau's new villa at Bracondale show that he wished to screen off the public highway and nearby cottages of Trowse which would spoil the sense of retirement when viewed from the house. Similarly he wanted an arable field replaced by pasture. But he was quite content to leave the church tower in view, as well as such interesting distant features as the mouth of a cavern in the opposite hillside, a windmill, and a road curving away out of sight round the contour. These were incidents that nuanced the landscape and added associative meaning.³⁵

The hillier country of north-east Norfolk, where Repton had created the landscaped estate of Sheringham Hall, was also the object of Edmund Bartell's enthusiasm, described in his book *Cromer considered as a Watering Place, with Observations on the Picturesque Scenery in its Neighbourhood* (1800, 2nd ed. 1806). He too was well aware of the trains of thought which might be aroused by landscape and, especially, seascape which 'under every circumstance and combination, must be productive of new ideas' – and among them of course, during these years of conflict with France, intensely patriotic ideas. But Bartell at times expresses emotions more Wordsworthian than picturesque. He was particularly susceptible to panoramic views at sunset, which he confessed heightened his normal responses, set his imagination alight, and filled his heart with feelings of benevolence. The passages where he describes such moments of transcendence must surely have been familiar to Crome, for Bartell had been elected an honorary member of the Norwich Society of Artists and had doubtless contributed copies of his publications to its library.³⁶

If the picturesque was dominant in the theory and practice of most Norwich School painting,³⁷ Crome's *Mousehold Heath* goes clearly against the grain. For one thing it lacks the necessary degree of variety and association-rich incident. In design it is plain and symmetrical, in colour subtle but fairly subdued. The main object of attention is an undistinguished expanse of heath under a huge sky. Only the foreground is textured and variegated, but if one is tempted to regard the patches of wild flowers as picturesque touches, it is enough to recall Uvedale Price's comment that 'ground covered with docks, thistles or nettles, is merely ugly'.³⁸

Like other contemporary painters of the English scene, Crome was intent to raise the status of landscape art – which ranked none too high in the academic hierarchy of genres. Hence his advice to his pupils to dignify whatever they painted, to compose in broad masses and to simplify their effects. 'Trifles in nature must be overlooked', he told James Stark, 'that we may have our feelings raised by seeing the whole picture at a glance, not knowing how or why we are so charmed.'³⁹ His own practice stemmed from the study not only of Dutch naturalistic picturesque but from the idealising landscapes of Claude and Wilson, and the spacious patterns of light and shade in Rembrandt. But the grandeur that Crome looked for in landscape painting fulfilled more than pictorial needs. Just as religious or 'history' painting was believed to have a powerful moral effect on the spectator, elevating the mind and inspiring noble feelings, so too 'in the more humble department of landscape painting we are taught "to look through nature up to nature's God". A mind feelingly alive to the beauties of the material world before him will necessarily look from effect to cause . . .'.⁴⁰ These words of James Stark (quoting a well-known line from Pope's *Essay on Man*) almost certainly echo Crome's own teaching. Next to Biblical revelation itself, natural theology was considered the most persuasive of arguments for a divinely ordered universe. The wonders of creation, the innumerable examples

of apparent forethought and deliberate contrivance in the design of living things, the laws which seemed to govern scientific phenomena, all pointed to a beneficent and omnipotent First Cause. Orthodox Anglicans and Dissenters alike found this line of reasoning overwhelmingly convincing. Sir James Edward Smith, heir to a notable tradition of Norwich botany and at this time still owner of the Linnaean collections on natural history at his house in Surrey Street, regarded the world as a veritable museum filled with proofs of God's wisdom and power.⁴¹ In his many publications and courses of lectures (held in Norwich and elsewhere) he was forever making the point: 'Is it not desirable to call the soul from the feverish agitation of worldly pursuits, to the contemplation of Divine Wisdom in the beautiful economy of Nature. Is it not a privilege to walk with God in the garden of creation, and hold converse with his providence?'⁴² Inevitably he quotes Pope's phrase,⁴³ as Stark had done, and as Elizabeth Gurney did in a diary entry about the time Crome was drawing master to the family:

. . . I love to 'look through Nature up to Nature's God'. I have no more religion than that . . . when I admire the beauties of nature, I cannot help thinking of the source from whence such beauties flow.⁴⁴

Crome must have heard similar expressions of faith from fellow-Baptists like the minister Joseph Kinghorn or Simon Wilkin (who was a serious entomologist as well as founder of a botanical garden on Linnaean principles at Costessey).⁴⁵ However the clinching evidence comes from his own library, because a year or so before his death he had acquired the complete works of William Paley,⁴⁶ author of *Natural Theology* and *Evidences of Christianity*, which at this period provided the best-known *a posteriori* case for a divine Creator.

The prominent vegetation in the foreground of *Mousehold Heath* may now take on added significance. While individual plants are distinguishable as burdocks, thistles, and so on, they are treated neither as emblems nor as botanical specimens. Nevertheless, in the absence of other distracting detail (for the two figures on the right serve mainly as *repoussoirs*), they catch the attention and seem to be more than a compositional device or a filler for a vacant area. They are shown in apposition to the widespread heath beyond — a relation of microcosm to macrocosm not unlike the *Study of Flints* in Norwich Castle Museum, where the distant hill deliberately echoes and emphasises the close-up still-life. A declivity hides the middle ground so that the contrast between near and far is abrupt, the eye jumps the intervening space, then runs exhilaratingly on towards an infinite distance. The disappearing track, the long-stretched horizon, the climbing sky, all contribute to the idea of immensity. And immensity, as the contemporary aesthete Alison observed, is rich in associations: 'Magnitude in length, is expressive to us of vastness, and, when apparently unbounded, of infinity . . . It is impossible to see a vast plain . . . without this impression.'⁴⁷ In other words Crome is here striving for effects of sublimity: not the *frisson* of mingled fear and delight experienced by the eighteenth-century aesthete at the sight of beetling crags, yawning chasms and raging torrents, but the exalted, religious sentiment felt in the presence of solemn magnificence, limitless space, spiritual light, profound silence and tranquillity. Barren heath, no longer dreary and devoid of all interest, has become another means of leading the mind by a train of associations up to nature's God.

In freeing himself from conventional attitudes to unimproved landscape, had Crome moved too far ahead of his patrons' taste? This picture, unlike his more traditional versions of Mousehold with windmills or shepherd boys, failed to sell and remained in his studio to the end. Its early history is confused. According

to one story Crome's wife eventually disposed of it for £12 to pay the rent; according to another, Joseph Stannard bought it for a guinea and used it to shade his window; and at some stage the canvas was in two pieces. A juster estimate of the work had to await the revaluation of Crome in the mid-nineteenth century, and perhaps even more the developing appreciation of heath and moorland scenery. For this latter change of outlook George Borrow was responsible as much as anyone with his unqualified approval of the free outdoors, the gypsy way of life and the 'wind on the heath'. And Borrow's elder brother, it may be remembered, took drawing lessons from Crome and exhibited with the Norwich artists from 1817 onwards, about the time *Mousehold Heath* was probably painted.

The idealisation, even sanctification, of the heath allowed no intrusion of alien concepts like humdrum agricultural improvement or the realities of economic distress or the nearby presence of a manufacturing city. Other possible but unwelcome associations had also to be played down: the Mousehold where regiments of the line or local militia drilled regularly, where smugglers and footpads still presented dangers to lonely travellers;^{4 8} the Mousehold of Kett's Oak of Reformation and Dussin's Dale (in which many of Kett's rebels were said to have been massacred), of country sports and pastimes, of mineral extraction and commercial traffic. Without undue sacrifice of naturalism or sense of locality, Crome has instead emphasised space, light, and undomesticated nature as if to stimulate the stream of consciousness and subliminal thought that Alison described as the sequel to perception:

Thus, when we feel either the beauty or sublimity of natural scenery . . . we are conscious of a variety of images in our minds, very different from those which the objects themselves can present to the eye. Trains of pleasing or of solemn thought arise spontaneously within our minds; our hearts swell with emotions, of which the objects before us seem to afford no adequate cause . . .^{4 9}

It is not claimed that Crome set out deliberately to play on the imagination and emotions for the sake of moral uplift, nor that his procedures were particularly original. His composition derives ultimately from the panoramic views of Seghers, Koninck and Ruisdael; his sense of the painted sublime probably owed something to Turner.^{5 0} There were a growing number of artistic precedents for the rendering of bare, open countryside, and in literature an appreciation of heaths, moors, and marshland was already dawning.^{5 1} Nevertheless, in *Mousehold Heath* these elements are brought together in an entirely personal way. The result is a picture unusual in its evocative power, even if the connotations are less obvious than in Crome's other paintings of cottages and old buildings, woodland groves and coastal views, rural lanes and sailing craft on quiet rivers. But it was not a work his fellow-citizens could come to terms with all at once. And that probably had something to do with the complex shifting of attitudes with regard to heathlands and wilderness landscape during the first part of the nineteenth century.

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¹William Taylor 'Outlines of a discourse on the history and theory of prospect-painting delivered at the Norwich Philosophical Society' was printed in three issues of the *Monthly Magazine*, 1 June 1814, 1 Oct 1814, 1 Jan 1815. The quotation comes from the October issue, p. 211.

²The theory of association was first fully enunciated by David Hartley in his *Observations on Man* (1749), developing ideas already expressed by John Locke and Rev. John Gray. Joseph Priestley further popularized the concept in 1775; his *Hartley's Theory of the Human Mind* was one of the earliest acquisitions of the

Norwich Public (Subscription) Library on its foundation in 1784. Archibald Alison's work on the principles of taste (1790, 2nd ed. 1811) again reinforced associationism.

³Originally popularized by the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, this idea crops up repeatedly and was a basic tenet of neoclassicism.

⁴David Hogdson *A reverie* (Norwich, 1860) p. 8.

⁵William Taylor, January issue p. 499, quoting from Sayers' paper 'In what does beauty consist?', first presented to the Norwich Speculative Society in 1791 and subsequently published in augmented form.

⁶William Windham *The diary of the Right Hon. William Windham, 1784 to 1810*, ed. Mrs. Henry Baring (London, 1866) pp. 141-2.

⁷*Edinburgh Review* vol. 32 (1819) p. 357. The passage continues: 'It is under the shelter of our hedges, that our corn is ripened; and while all is a thickly inhabited forest to the eye, all is a granary to our wants; and presents a picture of general comfort, happiness and stability, as rooted and venerable as the oldest of our oaks.'

⁸Samuel Johnson *A Journey to the Western Isles of Scotland*, ed. Mary Lascelles (New Haven, Conn., 1971) p. 41.

⁹Arthur Young *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Norfolk* (London, 1804) p. 385. On the next page Young hopes of Eccles Common that it 'will not long remain in such a horrid state'.

¹⁰For the general history of the Heath see particularly M. Knights *Mousehold Heath and the Manor of Pockthorpe* (Norwich, 1883?), and Peter Guildford *Mousehold Heath, Norfolk* (unpublished B.Sc. thesis, University of Nottingham, 1963).

¹¹Norfolk's scientific 'agriculturalists' are gently mocked in a contemporary publication, *Pursuits of Agriculture: a satirical poem in three cantos* (London, 1808-10).

¹²*Norwich Mercury* 1 Nov 1783.

¹³*The Norwich Directory* (Norwich, W. Chase, 1783) pp. iii-iv.

¹⁴James Woodforde *The Diary of a Country Parson*, ed. J. Beresford (Oxford, 1924-31), entries for 10 April 1777 and 12 June 1793.

¹⁵Society of United Friars *Transactions 15 Nov 1785 - 11 Nov 1794* (MS. in Norfolk Record Office Colman Collection), entries for 4 Sept, 16 Oct, 4 Nov 1792. Bartlett Gurney, who was planting his estate at Northrepps around this time, requested the reading of Wagstaff's proposals on 16 October.

¹⁶Nathaniel Kent *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Norfolk* (Norwich, 1796) p. 85.

¹⁷*Norfolk Chronicle* 18 Oct - 29 Nov 1794.

¹⁸*The Cabinet* (Norwich, J. March, 1794-5) vol. 1 pp. 48-58, vol. 2 pp. 215-221.

¹⁹Rev. John Pretyman, Prebend of the Cathedral, was one opponent - according to W. F. Dickes *The Norwich School of Painting* (London and Norwich, 1905) p. 108.

²⁰Nathaniel Kent, p. 85.

²¹*Norwich Mercury* 14 Feb 1801.

²²*An Act for Dividing, Allotting, and Inclosing the Commons and Waste Grounds within the Parish of Thorpe next Norwich . . .* (1800). Commissioners for Dividing and Inclosing Thorpe next Norwich *Extracts from the Award . . .* (Norwich, 1801).

²³For the hearing of *Tracey v. Davy* see *Norfolk Chronicle* and *Norwich Mercury* 1 Aug 1801. The case turned on Davy's right to keep up to 600 sheep on what had been Rackheath Common.

²⁴Relevant here is an advertisement in *Norfolk Chronicle* 4 Oct 1800 (and repeated in seven later issues): 'Picturesque Gardening. Mr. Malcolm most respectfully offers his services to those Noblemen and Gentlemen, who, for ornament or profit, are disposed to make alterations to their Grounds, Gardens, or Parks this Season. . . He will engage to make effectual Plantations upon *New Inclosures*, to any extent, 25 per Cent cheaper than is usually done, either by Contract or Commission; and which his connections, among the County as well as London Nurseries, enable him to effect.' Malcolm gave his address as Stockwell Place, Surrey.

²⁵P. Browne *The History of Norwich* (Norwich, 1814) p. 247; also *A Topographical and Historical Account of the City and County of Norwich* (Norwich, J. Stacy, 1819) p. 74.

²⁶It should be noted that the lists in Naomi Riches *The Agricultural Revolution in Norfolk* (London, 1937) are not entirely reliable.

²⁷Edward Rigby *Framingham, its Agriculture, &c. including the Economy of a Small Farm* (Norwich, 1820) p. 22.

²⁸*A Catalogue of the Entire Valuable Collection of Paintings, Prints, and Books, late the Property of Mr. J. Crome, dec. which will be sold . . . by J. Athow* (Norwich, 1821) p. 25.

²⁹See for example Arthur Young, *General View*. Norfolk parishes like Brancaster, Carleton and Heacham, where the poor seemed to have benefited, had to be set against Acle, Felthorpe, Heveningham and Ludham where they were worse off.

³⁰According to Archibald Alison's essay 'On the Nature of the Emotions of Sublimity and Beauty' sublime scenery is disfigured by 'traces of cultivation, or attempts towards improvement'. See *Essay on Beauty*, by Francis, Lord Jeffrey; and *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, by Archibald Alison (London, 1871) p. 107.

³¹The Norwich School's topographical or antiquarian strain is better represented in etching and lithography.

³²William Gilpin *Observations on Several Parts of the Counties of Cambridge, Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex*, relative chiefly to Picturesque Beauty (London, 1809) pp. 77 and 82.

³³R. W. Ketton-Cremer 'Humphrey Repton in Norfolk' in *A Norfolk Gallery* (London, 1948), which however fails to mention Bracondale.

³⁴Humphry Repton *Odd Whims and Miscellanies* (London, 1804) vol. 2 p. 151.

³⁵Repton's red book 'Bracondale: a villa of Philip Martineau', complete with coloured plan and views (one with 'slide'), is in the Colman and Rye collections, Norfolk County Library.

³⁶Bartell also published *Hints for Picturesque Improvements in Ornamented Cottages and their Scenery* (London, 1804).

³⁷Crome's earlier interest in the picturesque is perhaps best indicated by his tour to the Wye Valley, the *locus classicus* of picturesque scenery.

³⁸Uvedale Price *Essays on the Picturesque* (London, 1810 repr. 1971) vol. 3 p. 65.

³⁹C. H. Collins Baker *Crome* (London, 1921) p. 64.

⁴⁰*Norwich Mercury* 26 May 1827. A very rare contrary opinion was expressed by Rev. Samuel Hall in *Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester* (1785) vol. 1 pp. 223-40: his 'Attempt to shew that a taste for the beauties of nature and the fine arts has no influence favourable to morals' was in answer to a paper by William Falconer who upheld the usual view.

⁴¹J. E. Smith *Tracts relating to Natural History* (London, 1798) p. 20.

⁴²J. E. Smith *An Introduction to Physiological and Systematic Botany* (London, 1807) p. xviii.

⁴³J. E. Smith p. xiv.

⁴⁴Elizabeth Fry *Memoir of the Life of Elizabeth Fry*, ed. K. Fry and R. E. Cresswell (London, 1847) vol. 1, entry for 16 May 1797.

⁴⁵Although Crome was married and buried as an Anglican, he was for some time a member of the Baptist congregation and gave towards the cost of building St. Mary's chapel: see C. B. Jewson *Simon Wilkin of Norwich* (Norwich, 1979) p. 23.

⁴⁶*A Catalogue of the Entire Valuable Collection* . . . p.27 This was an edition of Paley in 5 volumes, published 1820.

⁴⁷Archibald Alison, p. 171.

⁴⁸The still adolescent Crome must have felt almost personally implicated in the affair of his namesake, the smuggler and highway robber John Crome, who was eventually arrested, tried, and hanged at Norwich (*Norwich Mercury* 4 and 25 Aug, 1 Sept 1787, *Norfolk Chronicle* 1 Sept 1787).

⁴⁹Archibald Alison, pp. 69-70.

⁵⁰For Dutch precedents see Arts Council *Shock of Recognition: the Landscape of English Romanticism and the Dutch Seventeenth Century School* (London, 1971). For Turner's widespread influence see Andrew Wilton *Turner and the Sublime* (London, 1980).

⁵¹Sylas Neville sometimes exhibited a precocious pleasure in such country. While he found the Newmarket area bleak, dreary and melancholy, the heaths from Thetford to Larlingford and west of Swaffham appealed to him, and on one occasion he described the summer marshes as beautiful. See *The Diary of Sylas Neville, 1767-88*, ed. B. Cozens-Hardy (London, 1950), entries for 11 Oct 1768, 26 Oct 1771, 6 Nov 1772, 26 Sept 1782, 31 March 1783, 17 June 1784.