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An interview with Professor Manning Clark

Abstract

In this essay Glen Mitchell of the History Department, University of Wollongong, interviews renowned Australian author and historian, Professor Manning Clark.

AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR MANNING
CLARK

by Glen Mitchell

Glen Mitchell:

Why do you think Ellis made his comment about The Short History of Australia?

Manning Clark:

Well, I think he really did feel quite seriously and I think quite sincerely that a lot of academic historians in Australia were left-wing in their political sympathies and I think he really quite seriously believed that the left was a challenge to the sort of society he believed in. And so anyone who looked to him to smack of left-wing sentiments and so on, ought to be exposed and attacked, I think it was a very naive view of his, but I think in all charity he meant

well.

GM: He quotes from your Short History that Menzies was sitting at his desk with his knuckles white and later on he placed them in his mouth. His comment on your observations of Menzies' actions was "unpleasant fellow, that Menzies".

MC: I certainly did not mean to imply that there was anything unpleasant or uncouth about Menzies. In fact, although some people thought I was very critical of Menzies, I felt a great deal of sympathy with him. I thought he was wrong on some occasions and that he made a great error of judgement in excessive adulation of British civilization long after it had lost all its drive and inner meaning in Australia as it were. In that sense, and I don't mean this unkindly, he was a bit of a darling dodo in our society. But I think one should look at him with sympathy and not laugh at him or make fun of him.

I have just written an article for Meanjin on the period 1949-1972 called "The Years of Unleavened Bread" and in it I've got a scene which I happened to see myself, of Menzies standing besides the grave of Evatt when Evatt died, and Evatt's coffin is in the grave and Menzies is standing there looking at it. He didn't say anything and there was no expression on his face. At that time Menzies was on top of the world, he was particularly very powerful, Evatt was dead and apparently defeated. I raise the question in the article whether or not in time history won't reverse the situation and think of Evatt as a living person, in the other sense of the word 'living', and Menzies as a dead

person, and say, somebody who was defending an old and dying order in society.

GM: Similar to the Hasluck's and Casey's of the world?

MC: Yes, I think all three are examples of that. But all of them were very sincere. They all came to man's estate at a time when Edwardian England was at its peak, certainly Menzies was enormously influenced by it, and their error, of judgement, was to assume that this society wasn't overripe: it had lost its historical significance.

I think that it is very interesting in history, both contemporary history and past history, to think of who was in the River of Life and who was out of it. In any particular historical epoch, there seems to be a River of Life; the river is flowing in a certain direction, presumably, and those with great insight and great strength, get into that river and flow with it and possibly influence its direction slightly (but not all that much). Whereas those who are not in the River of Life may try to oppose it and to swim against it or deflect it, and they get swept aside and I imagine this is Menzies. Over a long period of time, the River of Life gradually left him.

GM: Did you have any reaction to Ellis' comments at the time?

MC: No. Because I didn't think he'd understand what I was trying to get at.

2: You dismissed it?

3: Well I wouldn't say I dismissed it too strongly. I never particularly relished criticism. I don't think anyone does. But I didn't think a man ought to influence what one said in the future. Sometimes critics are helpful in this way even though they may say things that you may find are distasteful and offensive. Nevertheless, on reflection you can think "Yes, there's something in that".

4: In that comment, he said that all "the goodies" are on the left and all "the baddies" are on the right. Are there for you "goodies" and "baddies"?

3: No. No! I'm probably more concerned and preoccupied with the quantity of good and the quantity of bad within the one person, rather than saying that any particular person was 'good' and other particular person was 'bad'.

4: Ian Turner mentioned that aspect in his Overland article, that you see people as a mixture of darkness and light and no man can escape the darkness.

3: Yes. I think you see that particular point very well in, say the character of Robert O'Hara Burke, the explorer. I'm just trying to write about him now, or Charles Sturt the explorer. Both of them, indeed a great number of the explorers, are men of great strength. But they also have certain weaknesses. And often what interests me is the combination between chance and weakness which may lead a person on to his

destruction. Say in the case of Burke, it's only by chance that there is no-one at the depot when he gets back in April, 1861. But it's weakness that makes him decide, that instead of going back to the Menindee on the Darling, that they'll make for Mt. Hopeless in South Australia. This is a rash, a compulsive, a desperate decision, and it's that combination of the chance and the weakness that help them to lead on to Burke finally dying in the centre of Australia.

Turner also writes of the darkness in men's hearts and how this relates to man's constant search for happiness. How do you come to an understanding of the "darkness in men's hearts"?

Well, I suppose there are three main sources we have for everything. What one sees in other men, by watching their behaviour, what one learns about other men by reading what they have said about themselves both in the present and the past, and what one knows from the Greek advice 'to know thyself'

I don't imply for one moment that there are supernatural sources for this, but I think you can hold this view without necessarily subscribing to any view about divine intervention in human affairs. I don't know whether this would be interesting for you, but I remember one of those modern playwrights coming to see me for advice about an historical play he was writing, and after we'd a very interesting talk, he said to me about Volume 1 in my History of Australia. 'You must have been greatly influenced by what you observed in your colleagues'. I thought that was a very interesting remark.

What I saw in a small society in Canberra, like in a university world and the world of politicians. I've spent an enormous amount of time going to Parliament House and watching, going home and writing notes and spending an enormous amount in watching people in the university world and writing notes on it.

Does that type of observation help you to understand yourself?

Oh, yes, yes. That's certainly true. There's a remark by Thomas Hardy which I'm very interested in and that is, 'Every man must report what his idiosyncracies lead him to observe; or some words like that. Or there's a remark by Henry James, one of the short remarks by Henry James, 'A man gives what he has'.

There are times when you claim to know about people's thoughts in an historical event. Is this a case of Collingwood's 'encapsulation'.

Yes, and it raises a very interesting question and that is how can you know anything about what goes on in the minds of another person. And that does raise almost a problem of epistemology.

It also assumes that the character knew what he was thinking.

Yes, I was going to say that. There's a remark in one of those Old Testament books, Nehemiah, I think, which says that the human heart is deceitful above all things. Who can know it?

and what interests me is who can know it.

The question about knowing is 'Who can know what is going on inside himself and who can know what is going on inside someone else. 'But, although it's difficult to find any rigorous and unassailable reasons for demonstrating that you can know, I think you ought to have a go at it. And you put it tentatively and there is always the chance that you may be right. And the best test of whether you have said anything worthwhile, is whether people who read it say, 'Yes, my God, that may be right'. I don't think you are claiming anything else than that.

Do you think that's some kind of historical licence?

No, I don't think so and I think it is more than a guess. I know some people become worried and very worked up about the use of portraits. All sorts of cautions one ought to observe in the use of portraits, but I think a portrait can tell you a great deal, sometimes as evidence.

I think it's a mistake for historians just to rely on written records. There are other sources which are very valuable to supplement the written records. There are portraits, there are remarks on tombstones, because, after all, Death is such a fundamental event and people often finally speak the truth when they are confronted with Death. Not necessarily, but sometimes they do. And then there is the actual site itself where the event happened and so on. I think you should make use of all the sources you can.

GM: Can you know everything?

MC: The past is like a great attic. You select from it what you are interested in. The test is, when people read what you say is whether they say 'Yes, this was a central thing in life,' or not. You see, I think what matters in a writer's work is what you might call 'the quantity of felt life', in what he has felt to be important about life. Both influence his choice of events from the past. There are millions of events from the past, they are all mixed, chaotic, it's in disarray. The writer, I like to sometimes use the word 'artist' here, the artist is something like God, in the book of Genesis. He imposes an order on the chaos. You judge a person by what order he detects in the chaos.

GM: And allied to the sense of creation, is the sense of failure?

MC: Oh yes, indeed. Anyone who has a go is acutely aware of what he lacks. I mean it is only people who have never had a go who are immodest about those things. I think once you have tried to tell any story about the past, you realise very acutely your own limitations and your weakness.

GM: This also relates to the historian's own direct personal experience and his own indirect substitutive experience.

MC: Yes. Going back to the portraits, anyone, who going to the Dixon Gallery, Mitchell Library, and having looked at the two portraits of Macquarie, the one done shortly after he arrived in New South Wales, and the one done when he gets

back to London, the old Viceroy, after all it's only a gap of eleven years. Anyone looking at those two portraits would, I think, have to say, 'My God, what happened to you?'

GM: Or recently, the 1964 picture of Nixon and the one taken following his recent discharge from hospital?

MC: Yes, I mean that's a perfect example. You would have to say, 'My God, what happened to you? Did you do this to yourself or was it society that did it to you or was it a combination?'

GM: In the Short History, you mention that Evatt failed on his Washington missions during the Second World War, because he faced the problems all provincials face when confronting metropolitans.

MC: I think there was an element of the provincial among our politicians. I think there are three stages. First, they are colonial. I don't know when they stopped being colonial, roughly they stopped at the turn of the century. Then they become provincial, some of them, and I suppose the next stage is when they get a world view.

Evatt sometimes had a world view, especially after the Second World War. He had the interest of the world at large at heart, sometimes Menzies did, but Menzies shrank in some ways, and got into looking through the eyes of a man who believed in the uniqueness and values of British civilisation. But when one looks at the overall history of this country, I hope one would look at it as part of a much larger thing,

'converation of mankind; for want of a better phrase, and we are all contributing towards this. After all said and done a great deal of what happened to Australians, happened not because of anything they did, but because they were part of something larger. You know the expression by Marx, "Men make their own History". Well, the paradox is, and I'm just jumping around here (a contradiction if you like), colonials don't make their own history. Decisions are made for them in London, and provincials don't make their own history.

And I think one of the things that interest me at the moment in this country is how we are gradually breaking away from our provincial status into really making our own history for the first time, or almost the first time.

GM: You're referring specifically to Labor's win?

MC: Yes, and I think Whitlam will probably come out well historically in this particular context. We are really now thinking for the first time seriously of going it alone, not under the British umbrella or the American umbrella, but going it alone in the way Sweden has gone it alone for a long time or the way Israel has tried.

GM: When you reviewed Hasluck's Government and the People, you commented that Hasluck wrote not so much as a participant, but as an historian and as someone who had been 'vouchsafed' a vision of what had happened. Is this historical intuition or mystical, or what?

Well, here we touch on a very delicate ground I'm afraid. But just from observing other people and reading what other people have said, I think there are people who have "seen" more than most people. Vision is "to see", it comes from the Latin words "to see". There is also the Greek word "psychodelic" which is used a lot at the moment, psychodelic drugs. Now, ethnologically, the word "psychodelic" means to expand the mind, and I think a person who has seen a lot can help others to expand their minds, and to see more than they normally see.

Now, referring to Hasluck. He had seen quite a lot and when you read that particular work you say, 'My God, that's right, that's there....' All that you had been aware of before, you've seen as it were, if I may use a Biblical expression, you've seen through the glass darkly. But somebody who has had good insight and clear sight can help you to see face to face. Do you see what I mean?

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