

THE FOND HEART WANDERED: CHARMIAN CLIFT & KIAMA

"My late father, a dogmatic man and something of an armchair philosopher, used to be given to say - among other trenchant pronouncement - that the air of our hometown would be worth a quid a whiff if some quack could bottle it and get out a patent." So wrote Charmian Clift six weeks after returning to the hometown she had last seen seventeen years earlier.

And "Now", she wrote in January 1965, "having just returned from a sentimental pilgrimage to my birthplace, I am inclined to think that a quid a whiff is bargain basement rates."

Charmian Clift was born in Kiama and first breathed the Kiama air - air she would later characterize as "something between tangy and sweet, such clean country air, spiced with smells of kelp and clover and cow-dun, mixtures of sea-brine and rich loam turned in the sun" - on August 31st, 1923.

Her father, Sidney Clift, had been born and raised in Derbyshire, England. Having begun training as an engineer, but never fully qualifying, he came to Australia before World War One and married Amy Curry, a girl he met in a Kings Cross boarding house. They came to live in Kiama where Sid had scored a job as a mining engineer in charge of one of the blue metal quarries there run by the State Government Railways.

Their house was a small weatherboard cottage on the highway overlooking Bombo beach. Here they raised 3 children: Margaret (born 1919), Barre (born 1922) and Charmian.

It was an idyllic spot to grow up, particularly if you're dad had a job. And Charmian, along with quite few others in Kiama, would be particularly grateful to Sid Clift for holding on to his job when the Great Depression hit the town.

According to Garry Kinnane (*George Johnston*, Nelson, 1986, pp. 70-74), when the NSW Railways Department decided to close the quarry during the depression, Sid Clift insisted on keeping it going by doing all the maintenance himself and putting in lots of extra unpaid hours. In this way the quarry struggled on and many men were kept in employment in Kiama, whereas most workers to the north of the town did it very tough.

But, with or without a job, an economic depression in Kiama was a lot better than one in Surry Hills or Kings Cross, for there were always fish to land and rabbits to catch whenever the bread and dripping started to get low.

And as for social life, well, a skinny-dip by the Clift sisters on a moonlight at Bombo beach was probably much better than any number of *Darlinghurst Nights* with Kenneth Slessor's 'Backless Betty from Bondi'. But how was poor Charmian to know this? She only got to see the bright lights of Sydney through the eyes and the tales of good-looking boys she met in the holiday season on the beach below her parents' home.

Cathedral Rocks, the milky green of Jamberoo and the wonders of the Blowhole and Minnamurra Falls seemed a picturesque but unpeopled wilderness to a girl who though she read widely only felt the paper-taste of a Europe, and its cities

and culture, as a dryness (yet a dryness felt alluringly, tantalizingly and longingly) on the tongue and in the mind. Yet it was a kind of dryness that eats away at the heart, a kind of dryness, a kind of unwordly otherness, that was totally unlike the soft dryness of the sand on Bombo Beach at low tide.

It was the kind of dryness that made Charmian's daily 7.30 train ride from Kiama Station to Wollongong High a drudgery. It was train ride that brought not the city and the culture of a young girl's dreams, just a rattling ride to a metropolis that was not even really 'suburban', for Wollongong City in 1930 was really only just a 'big country town'.

And so back in Kiama the bookish Clift family - Shakespeare, Montaigne, Byron, Laurence Sterne and Rabelais - perched high on the cliffs over Bombo, kept largely to themselves, while the sisters roamed the rocks, soaked up the sun and dreamt of far-away places.

It appears in Kiama there was the usual social divide between 'the boss' and 'the men' that frequently occurs in small village industries. And this, no doubt, affected the Clift sisters' social life. Their society therefore became the beach and they grew up as strangely cultivated, aloof, glamorous teenagers who nonetheless, when the surf was up, were capable of rescuing strapping, and highly embarrassed, males from the secret treacheries of the notorious Bombo undertow.

When Margaret left town, however, Charmian increasingly longed for the excitements she now more firmly associated with the Sydney her big sister was discovering while studying art there in the mid 1930s.

Back at Wollongong High School, Charmian was apparently gifted, but bored. She dropped out, tried a business-type course for a while, but later went back to Wollongong High. She then left school for good and tried nursing in Lithgow, but soon returned to Kiama.

There appears to have been some darker cause for this shiftlessness when it came to her schooling. It may have been that Charmian became pregnant and had a child, which she then had adopted out, during her teens. If true, this would explain the considerable hostility that still exists towards Charmian among some long-time and easily shocked residents of Kiama with whom I have spoken.

In the early 1980s an article on Clift was published in the National Times newspaper in which it was suggested that Clift was a 'bad girl' who went with taxi drivers when she was young. A letter to the editor from a correspondent the following week made the point that, from his memory, there weren't many taxis in Kiama in the 1930s!

Undaunted, however, Garry Kinnane remarks that Clift's impatience for the bright lights "got her into some risky situations, such as hitching rides on the highway with travelling salesman and taxi drivers, and having to battle her way out of trouble." (p.73) To determine whether or not such events took place we will probably have to wait for Nadia Wheatley's blockbuster biography of Charmian forthcoming from Collins/ Angus and Robertson. In the meantime, it is to be hoped some elderly Kiama people overcome their seemly reticence and go into print on the question of Charmian Clift's secret love-child.

What we can know for certain, however, is that Clift was either blessed (or cursed) with extraordinary good looks. A picture of her on Bombo beach went on to win her a cheque for 50 pounds as 'Miss Pix magazine'. And the amazing

shot of Clift posing as a courtesan at Kiama, photographed by her sister Margaret and included in Kinnane's biography of George Johnston, is probably the only portrait of a topless, and possibly completely naked, young woman ever likely to be of much interest to members of the Illawarra Historical Society.

And so the girl from Bombo beach, and the less than lustrous graduate of Wollongong High, moved on to greater things.

In 1942 Charmian and her sister joined the Australian Women's Army Service and, in 1944, Charmian was transferred to Land Headquarters in Melbourne where her literary talents were somehow uncovered and she was placed in charge of the Ordnance Corps monthly magazine, *For Your Information*.

Around this time Charmian began to write short stories and, through a mutual friend, met the writer and journalist George Johnston. Later she would later join him on the staff of the Melbourne *Argus* and, later still, become his second wife.

After they began to live together openly, Charmian and George impulsively decided to move to Sydney. Driving up in Johnston's car from Melbourne, they stopped of at Bombo to meet Charmian's parents. In effect, the stay in Kiama became their honeymoon, sunbaking on Bombo beach and exploring the natural beauties of Kiama and environs. Johnston would later write of this time in *Clean Straw For Nothing*: "in Lebanon Bay [Kiama] we have been given our own small vision of paradise." Intriguingly, Garry Kinnane claims that 'Lebanese cedars . . . are a feature of Kiama' (p.90), but he is obviously unaware of the magnificent strands of Australian cedar that once surrounded the town.

As well as living together, Clift and Johnston began to collaborate as authors and spent almost seven months working on their first joint effort, both in Kiama and Sydney. Charmian, on occasion, would take her typewriter down to Kiama and George too would sometimes accompany her. They would sit together typing away on the verandah of Charmian's parents' home, gazing out over the beach. The novel that resulted was set, of all places, in Tibet. Based largely on Johnston's experiences, it was called *High Valley* and won the *Sydney Morning Herald* Literary Prize in 1948.

In the 50s Charmian and George left Australia to live in London and then for an extended period on various Greek Islands. But the memories of Kiama and Bombo beach were strong enough to well-up in Clift's mind and produce her intriguing first novel, set in a fictional Kiama and called *Walk To The Paradise Gardens* (Hutchison, 1960; Collins Imprint, 1989).

Four years after the initial publication of *Walk To The Paradise Gardens*, Charmian returned, not just in imagination, but in person to her beloved Kiama. She and Johnston, now international celebrities, gave an interview to a reporter from the *Kiama Independent*. Sadly her parents were now both long dead and buried in Kiama Cemetery, Sid Clift having died in 1946, Amy a few years later in Sydney.

(to be continued)