

THE FOND HEART WANDERED: CHARMIAN CLIFT & KIAMA

(continued from May Bulletin)

The **Kiama Independent** (24/11/64) reported that "The couple returned to Australia a few months ago after living in Europe for 15 years, 10 of them in the Aegean. Charmian Clift gave "sentiment" as the main reason for her visit, but she also claimed she and Johnston were planning to build a "writers retreat" in or near Kiama, where they could work in peace and quiet.

The former student of Kiama Primary proudly, and perhaps inaccurately, informed the **Independent** that "her first job was as a typist with Kiama Motors, then owned by Mr. Neil Hindmarch."

Back in Kiama, staying for a weekend at the Brighton Hotel, Charmian recalled outings with her father who was a keen fisherman, and how she loved to dive overboard from his boat and to swim in the sea. She also said it felt "marvellous" to be back and remarked, "I've noticed the new building development, but the wonderful character of the place hasn't changed. There is a sort of unity and harmony about the place."

George Johnston's remarks to the reporter on this aspect of the town were even more interesting in the light of present-day developments in Kiama.

"I've just been on a trip around Australia [a publicity tour for **My Brother Jack**] and have seen hundreds of towns, including highly praised ones, but I have never seen anything with the continuity of Kiama - past, present and future."

"Other towns have marvellous characters and qualities, but they have scars across them. They don't hold together like this place. That is the charm of Kiama, I think."

One looks at Kiama today, after its most recent 'beautification', after reading the headlines about the steadily increasing height of the new supposedly 2 storey Brighton Hotel, after shopping at the soulless supermarket and driving past the burgeoning home-units, and one sadly sees precisely the scars at whose absence George Johnston could marvel in 1964.

Charmian promised the **Kiama Independent** reporter that she would write "a special article" for the paper. Unfortunately, it does not appear to have ever been received by the paper.

She did, however produce an article for her column in the **Sydney Morning Herald** entitled "That Sentimental Journey Home"(7/1/65). It's a rather thin and strangely misty and generalized piece - qualities, I feel, which also weaken the imagined Kiama of **Walk in The Paradise Gardens**, despite its marvellous evocation of Bombo beach and the old Brighton Hotel. Unfortunately, the article reads

as if its "a little soggy with nostalgia", to steal a phrase Clift herself uses in a different context in the same article.

But Clift nonetheless caught the Kiama of 1964 and becalmed it in its last true blaze of glory. She noted what she termed superficial changes - "a spanking new Leagues Club", "and on the hills above the town a new modern High School - but felt "the spirit is the same".

"Prosperous without being smug, placid without being somnolent, a summer resort now, but without a touch of scabbiness." Tragically, the 'substantial changes which have taken place since 1964 have produced a 'scabbiness which has in recent years been inflamed to eczema.

But what I feel accounts for the weadness of Clift's account of her home-town - and they are weaknesses caused more by what her misty, sentimentalizing generalizations leave out - is that in returning to it, after the horrors of her time spent in poverty, depression over her literary prospects, marital problems and illness on the Greek Islands of Kalymnos and Hydra, the unbottled air of Kiama troubled her far more than she could say.

Sadly one catches a glimpse of one of the causes of her later suicide when she writes of the people in Kiama in 1964 who said, "Do you remember how you always swore you'd get out of this town and go and see the world?"

The sadness of Clift's reply as she looked out on Kiama from the windows of the old Brighton Hotel goes to the heart of the sadness she carried with her always: "Funny, isn't it? I mean here's everything here."

The reporter from the *Kiama Independent* noted in November 1964 that Clift "is now writing a new novel "To the end of the morning" based on her childhood in Kiama. According to Garry Kinnane (p.79), the manuscript is still extant, along with a typescript of "Greener Grows the Grass, bearing no date but probably written in 1969, the year of Clift's suicide.

I will try and prevail upon my publisher, Tom Thompson, at Angus & Robertson to allow either the IHS or Angus & Robertson to enable "To the End of the Morning" to reach a wider audience, for I imagine it represents an important statement from the Illawarra's most important native-born literary figure.

How strange then that Olga Masters (a writer born in Pambula and who never wrote a word about the Illawarra) is the only 'local' literary figure to gain a "star" in the footpath outside the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre? Surely Wollongong High's most illustrious English student deserves a guernsey! Who knows such an award might serve to remind others of the special, if tortured, place 'home' always held in her heart, causing some to explore what little remains of Clift's Kiama: the surf off Bombo and the vestiges of the village of old Jamberoo and the lush, green pastures Charmian never really knew.

Returning to Kiama after an absence of seventeen years may have made Charmian Clift's heart grow fonder, but it may also have been one of the factors that sent her fond heart on that final wandering which hurtled her, within five short years, into a pit of despair that would prevent her from ever breathing the Kiama air again.

Joseph Davis