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## 'It's Not a Story. It's History'

### **Abstract**

In 1844 George Fyfe Angas promoted South Australia as a 'model colony', possessing 'a more highly moral, religious and intelligent population with Christian privileges than any other of our colonies' (Pike 138). Our model settlement was supposed to be ardent in its concern for Aborigines. In South Australia, we are now beginning to face up to that promotion as myth.

SUE HOSKING

## 'It's Not a Story. It's History'

In 1844 George Fyfe Angas promoted South Australia as a 'model colony', possessing 'a more highly moral, religious and intelligent population with Christian privileges than any other of our colonies' (Pike 138). Our model settlement was supposed to be ardent in its concern for Aborigines. In South Australia, we are now beginning to face up to that promotion as myth.

The genre of Aboriginal life narrative is seriously under-represented, in fact barely existent, in South Australia. Recently, however, numbers of Aboriginal people in this state have begun to tell the stories of their lives. One of these is Clem O'Loughlin.

Clem O'Loughlin is a contemporary Aboriginal man, born on Point Pearce Mission on the York Peninsula, South Australia in 1934. According to the records, he 'ceased to be an Aborigine' in 1948, when his family was served exemption papers.<sup>1</sup> His father was a sober, hard-working family man, deemed capable of making his way alone in the white world. That was not what he wanted, for himself or his children, but that is what Clem inherited. Clem's story demonstrates the absurd, immoral and dangerous lie that would separate decency, determination and the capacity for hard work from Aboriginality.

I have been working with Clem, on and off, for two years. We are working together to produce a book which will represent the life of Clem O'Loughlin, told in his own voice. Our work is collaborative and involves numerous consultations and negotiations. When the book is finished, I will think of it as Clem's book. I do not expect to have my name on it. What I claim, though, is the right to tell what I have learned from working with Clem. We come from different worlds. Our worlds have overlapped in the production of Clem's book. For me that has been one of the most simultaneously rewarding and unsettling experiences of my life. My story, told separately, is my version of that experience. To some extent my version is a series of confessions. I made a lot of mistakes.

When we first met Clem and I got on like a house on fire. Clem seemed to have no difficulty chatting to me, until I switched on the tape recorder. Although the dictaphone we now use is small and unobtrusive, it is still the case that Clem reveals more of himself when the dictaphone has been switched off. From the beginning, Clem has had a sense of what belongs in his book, and what does not. Our ideas on this do not correspond. Clem's greatest worry over our project is

that he will not have enough to tell me — not enough for a book. After two years I begin to understand his concern. Of course he has a story, but how much *can* he tell me?

My concern is: What kind of mongrel story are we making together? Where does it fit? Who will want it?

I know, from previous experience, that commercial publishers are more likely to accept manuscripts with a marketable degree of sex and violence, although few would be so crass as to put it that way in relation to Aboriginal narrative. I find myself increasingly curious about what Clem hints at — the dysfunctional aspects of his marriage, the period of alcoholism, neglect of the children, experiences of racism, brushes with the law, subversive acts against authority. I think that non-Aboriginal readers would respond more dramatically to Clem's achievements if they knew exactly what he has overcome. What I thought we would be producing was a masculine equivalent of Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love To Town*.

I entered our collaborative venture with some fancy ideas about narrative. I did not recognise those ideas as fancy or academic. I still refer to Clem's 'story'. I did not realise it, to begin with, but he does not like that word 'story'.

I know I am switching tenses. Somehow, in this project, it is difficult to find the right tense. The past is so much in the present. I would like to be able to convey that. I ask Clem why he wants to put his 'story' into a book. He tells me that others have told him he should do this — whitefellas. One of these people is a former principal of Taoundi Aboriginal College, where Clem worked as a driver, driving instructor, and when I met him as a general do-anything employee (an ill-defined position which disappeared with funding cuts one year short of twenty-five years of service). Eventually Clem tells me that he wants to put his life into a book for his grannies — his twenty-five grandchildren. One of those grandchildren is AFL superstar Michael O'Loughlin, of the Sydney Swans. Another is Ricky O'Loughlin, just beginning his career with the Adelaide Crows. Oh dear. I can not claim to be fanatical about football.

Looking back over our very first transcript I see how determined I am to tread a familiar path. I do not know what 'book' means to Clem. At the time I did not know that Clem had only read one book from cover to cover, and that was about the life of an alcoholic actress — something he had to read during a rehabilitation program. He can not remember the name of the actress. It would have been Lillian Roth, who wrote *I'll Cry Tomorrow*, used by Alcoholics Anonymous. I think that Clem will start talking at the beginning and talk through to the end. I think I am going to be shaping an oral narrative so that it reads well as text. I think he has the story, and I am the wordsmith. But it is not as simple as that.

**Sue:** *So do you think of yourself as a bit of a storyteller? Mary-Anne's told me that a lot of people around here think of you as a story-teller and that you've always got ...*

**Clem:** *Well, no. I've been talking about history ... ?*

**Sue:** *Is talking about history talking about the past?*

**Clem:** *Yes.*

**Sue:** *That's what you want to put in the book?*

**Clem:** *Mm.*

**Sue:** *So it's an autobiography?*

**Clem:** *Mm.*

**Sue:** *Your story.*

**Clem:** *Mm. Ok?*

**Sue:** *Yeah. Ok.*

**Clem:** *We'll start it now?*

*[Laughter]*

**Sue:** *I did say something in the letter about how there are misunderstandings ...*

**Clem:** *Sure. I don't worry about that.*

**Sue:** *Well I think this is your story. I'm doing it because I'm an academic and I'm interested in your story and I want to help you put it in a book. That's all I want out of it.*

**Clem:** *Ok. I don't care if I get anything out of it. I want to show my kids later on. Grannies.*

**Sue:** *Absolutely!*

**Clem:** *Twenty-five or more.*

*[Laughter]*

**Sue:** *Twenty five of them waiting to read it!*

**Clem:** *Twenty five grannies. Yeah.*

I had never experienced a close working relationship with an Aboriginal man before. Clem and I were 'matched', as it were, by people associated with the Aboriginal community college at Port Adelaide. Clem needed a writer. I was known to have an interest in Aboriginal life writing and to have served what you might call an 'apprenticeship' in producing such stories through some involvement with Veronica Brodie, whose autobiography is due to be published by Wakefield Press in 2001. Clem and I agreed to meet.

I wrote a letter to Clem. 'Dear Clem ...' I told him about my childhood, close to Port Adelaide, where Clem lives. I told him about my grandfather, with whom I lived as a child. My grandfather was a merchant seaman and later boiler inspector on the wharves there. I did not tell Clem that the Smiths were first settlers at Birkenhead, next to the Port. I did not say that my grandfather had fought as a volunteer fireman at the Sugar Works by the Port River — the Sugar Works that had poisoned the land where Veronica Brodie's Kaurna ancestors had been traditional owners at the time of settlement. I included a photo with the letter. When I stuck the stamp on the envelope, I noted that it was one in a series of roses. Somehow, what I was doing had the feeling of a courtship. Curiously, I was making the advances.

When I went to Tauondi Aboriginal College to meet Clem my sense of what our relationship might be immediately evaporated. I thought we would at least have Port Adelaide in common, but when I entered the gates of the Aboriginal college I was in a different place: out of place. The photograph was redundant. Everyone knew who I was looking for.

It took me a long time to admit that we might have different views on what was most interesting in Clem's life. After three sentences I was quizzing him about why he was born over thirty miles from Point Pearce, at Wallaroo, rather than close-by in Maitland Hospital. He did not know. Later, reading what Eileen Wanganeen had to say in *Point Pearce: Past and Present*, I discovered what it means for a pregnant woman to be sent from Point Pearce to Wallaroo.

All my children were born at Wallaroo Hospital. We have to go in with an open buckboard, nothing decent. Sometimes some of the women would get their babies on the road. (31)

Later again, researching State Records, I discovered that Maitland Hospital would not take the Aboriginal women. A shilling a week was deducted from the wages of Point Pearce men to build a special wing at Maitland hospital, but it did not happen. What do I do with this information that did not come from Clem?

I know I am too interested in Clem's mother. I push Clem for domestic details but I can not get enough. He tells me that his mother was 'a ordinary housewife'. In revising the transcript he crosses out 'ordinary'. Is this a concession to me? What Clem remembers best about his mother is sitting on her lap in an A Model Ford. He was eight or nine. His mother let him steer the car.

It is his father he really wants to talk about. It is clear that Clem idolised his father. He tells me how all he wanted was to go rabbiting with Dad. He tells me about his father's successes as a shearer. He tells me about the generator his father made. He tells me about his father's funeral, when Clem was eighteen.

The story that most amazes me is the story of Clem's marriage to Cecilia. Because Clem's father was served exemption papers, against his will, the family had to leave Point Pearce. They set up home nearby, in Moonta. They have relatives on Point Pearce. Clem is obviously sneaking back onto the Mission. *I'm back in the present tense. I'm there.*

Clem gets a girl pregnant. He marries her. It is expected. Because, technically, Clem is no longer an Aboriginal, Cecilia can leave the Mission. She is exempted — married, technically, to a white man. But she does not want to leave her family. Clem can not stay. She will not go. Clem can not even visit his new wife without permission from the authorities. He sets up residence just outside the Mission boundary. There are others like him — exempted people who want to stay close to their relatives, to the place they still think of as home. They build shacks out of any old scrap they can salvage, from the dump, or wherever. They call the place

Hollywood. This is where the non-exempted people come for drink. The place becomes notorious.

I am much too curious about the marriage. The first child is born on Point Pearce, a daughter, Muriel. At some point Cecilia leaves the Mission to live with Clem. I suspect the authorities made her. Her health is bad. There are more children. Clem and Cecilia drink a lot. Clem tells me this off tape. They separate, but Clem continues to support his family. Clem has the opportunity to further his education in Adelaide. One of the children is desperately ill. Cecilia's family move to Salisbury, closer to Adelaide, to be near the hospital. Clem moves to the other side of town, to Port Adelaide, where he has regular work. Clem and Cecilia live separately, but stay in regular contact. They go back to York Peninsula together, frequently. They fish. They watch football. Clem says 'Cecilia put up with a lot. Any other woman would have left me'.

There is a lot of story missing. I wonder whether Cecilia will talk to me. Clem says he will ask. Cecilia says no. 'Why,' says Cecilia, 'would *she* want to talk to me?'

When I ask Clem about his other children he seems a bit vague.

'Muriel. And then Clem .... I've got more, haven't I?'

Clem looks to me to know. I look to him to know.

'I'll ask Cecilia,' he says.

Next time we meet he gives me two typewritten pages from Cecilia. I am *too* delighted. All the details of the children are there, but Cecilia has written as if she is Clem. I suggest that Cecilia might want to write a chapter about the children. What I really want is the two stories, standing side by side, but separate. This is not what Clem had in mind.

Later, when the dictaphone is off, Clem tells me that he and Cecilia are very sorry for times when they neglected their children. He tells me shame stuff. This is the kind of thing that would sell the book, but it is not meant for the book. This will be one of the silences in the story.

I remember a warning passed on to a friend of mine, Anne Bartlett. She has been commissioned by the South Australian Department of Aboriginal Affairs to produce the story of George and Maude Tongerie. Anne asked a too delicate question and George set her straight, quoting an elder — an old blackfella, George called him. The old man had said: 'If you can not understand my silences, how are you ever going to understand my words?' How, I wonder, can I draw attention to the significance of the gap in Clem's story? How will readers know there is a gap? How will readers know this is a silence they must respect?

It soon became apparent to me that I did not know enough about Point Pearce, or Point Pearce people. When I began to collect some information — especially from State Records — I found myself with a completely different problem. Although he has worked near or in Port Adelaide for over twenty years, Clem's life still centres around Point Pearce and Port Victoria, South of the Mission,

where he keeps his boat. His memories of Point Pearce and York Peninsula are happy memories. His father was alive. His mother looked after him. There was a large extended family. Clem knew everyone. He was happy to grow up and become a man, earn some money, help his mother out, and the rest of the family. He was proud to be employed and respected as a good worker. He was a good shearer and fruit picker. He worked on the Morgan-Whyalla pipeline. The spiders were horrible.

Researching historical and state records relating to Point Pearce and Point Pearce people I fail to understand why Clem's memories are so benign. I call myself a postcolonialist. I find myself wanting to impose my own outrage on this story of Point Pearce. I can't do that! Can I?

Point Pearce was established in 1868 on 600 acres of 'almost uncultivable land' (Archibald 11). A mission station and school were immediately established there. In 1868, there were seventy Aborigines at the mission. Within six years there were only twenty-eight. Nevertheless, the Reverend Wilhelm Kuhn, a Moravian missionary, was determined to establish a well-ordered Aboriginal village. People were sent to Point Pearce from near and far. More land was added and the holding increased to 20,000 acres. Work on the farm — caring for sheep and other livestock, shearing, clearing the land, cultivating the poor soil — was carried out by those who lived there. Wages determined by the Trustees of the mission were paid and inmates were charged for all goods and services, agistment and rent. Cottages were built and maintained by those who lived there. Life on Point Pearce was regulated by a bell and strictly supervised. This was resented by some:

We were ruled over by our white 'superiors' in the form of superintendents, then we had farm overseers, mechanical overseers, and there was no privacy whatsoever. They had full control of all the Aboriginal lives in those particular institutions. It was incredible, it was an incredible feeling, to be living in a place where your lives weren't your own because these white people really did have power over you. (in Wanganeen, 38)

Clem says nothing like this. He remembers the good times. He is very proud of his earnings. He remembers his wages from year to year.

Clem was only twelve when his family was served limited exemption papers. Clem's father died three years after his unconditional exemption. In State Records I find evidence of Alfred O'Loughlin's financial difficulty, following his departure from the Mission. In 1943 (at this stage a partially exempted Aborigine) Clem's father writes to the Secretary of the Aborigines Protection Board in careful coperplate:

Dear Sir,

I have after a deep consideration for my childrens future welfare paid a deposit of £12-0-0 on a 7 room house including Bath valued at £45-0-0 Situated at Moonta Mines My intention is to make this place my permanent home. Thereby giving my children the Opportunity to become useful and honorable citizens of the useful community. (O'Loughlin 1943)

He asks for a loan. He asks for bags of lime, sand, cement, paint, linseed oil and turps. He is granted the materials for renovating the house and one month's rations for himself and his family while he repairs the house. He must make other arrangements about paying the mortgage.

In the year following her husband's death, Clem's mother writes to the Board requesting some assistance with further repairs to the house. She is refused.

I think you will understand that the funds provided by Parliament for expenditure by this Department can be used only in connection with Aborigines. As you are an exempted person it would amount to improper use of Public Funds if any such work was carried out and paid for by this Department. (Aborigines Protection Board)

My photocopying piles up. A different kind of story is emerging from the records: I find evidence of ill-health, disease, prejudice, racism, violence, sexual abuse, sexually transmitted disease. Am I trying too hard? Clem does tell me about infant mortality. His mother lost twin baby girls with dysentery and a nine-year-old son to pneumonia. He will tell me later about the effects of alcohol on Point Pearce people. He tells me about the bell on Point Pearce, but does not seem resentful, as others were, about how 'that bloody bell' regulated his life. He does not tell me about the time the dentist came through Point Pearce and ripped out 135 aching teeth in a single day. Five of those teeth were Clem's. Surely he would not forget that?

Clem's great-grandfather was an Irish town planner. He surveyed Ceduna, on the edge of the Nullarbor. Clem's father, Alfred, came from Koonibba, west of Ceduna. Although he identifies so strongly with his father, Clem describes himself as an elder from the Narrunga people of York Peninsula. Clem has no language, other than English. Clem remembers his father speaking, he says, Pitjatjandjara. This seems odd to me. I do not know enough about language distribution to understand how this was possible. Anyway, when Clem's uncle visited Alf at their Point Pearce home, Clem heard Aboriginal language, late at night, inside the house. Clem remembers how happy that made his father — for days afterwards.

In the booklet researched in 1987 by the Narrunga Community College, Eileen Wanganeen suggests that the Point Pearce people 'were unable to identify with the mission' (Wanganeen). Although Point Pearce Mission certainly gathered in local Narrunga people, it also accommodated people from the Murray region and displaced, institutionalised people from Poonindie, near Port Lincoln, and Koonibba. By the early 1990s, as Christobel Mattingly points out, 'the generations growing up on Point Pearce had no first hand knowledge of traditional culture' (198). By the time exemptions were being served, the issue of Aboriginal identity was exceptionally complex. People on Point Pearce were a community. They took their sense of identity from each other and the place they lived in. To be declared exempt from an identity so recently reconstructed was a strange reward. People like Clem are still remaking themselves. His book will be an important

sign in this process. In all likelihood, Clem will not read it again. Why should he? He knows his own history.

A publisher I know said: 'Sure! I want to publish Aboriginal stuff. But it has to be interesting'. What is 'interesting'? Clem's life is fascinating to me. How do I make Clem's book attractive to people who will judge it against *My Place* and *Don't Take Your Love to Town*? I can not alter the facts, but I could 'package' them in various ways, without losing Clem's voice. Would this be a capitulation? Is capitulation worse than not seeing the book published?

Let us face it, I *want* to play with the structure of the book. Books are my business. I want Clem's narrative to have an impact. I know that all texts are fabrications. But I also know that what Clem tells me is not a fiction. It is his history.

I wish I could produce the gender balanced book: Clem's story and Cecilia's story — side by side, but separate. This is not likely to happen.

I have thought about Clem's story in relation to Aboriginal masculinities. Clem is most effusive and articulate when he talks about his relationship with his father, his history of work, fishing and football. I have access to other manuscripts written or dictated by Aboriginal men. They are not publishable as individual books, but certain chapters present 'interesting' and varied insights into what it means to be an Aboriginal man in contemporary times. Morris lost his memory in a car accident and is reconstructing his life as an Aboriginal man in urban Adelaide. Marty was abandoned by his wife and raised his children on his own, even though he thought that was woman's business. Gordon remembers his grandfather practising traditional medicine. Jared finished a university degree and has written a play that has been performed in South Africa. Chapters from Clem's story would be eminently publishable in such a collection. Clem and I have talked about this. Clem asked 'What *is* an anthology?' I would be worried that such an anthology would create an artificial kinship between its covers. For some of the contributors, this might be a problem. And who would we leave out?

I am still playing with the idea of the two-version history: Clem's positive version of his personal history, and the often contradictory records. I think both versions are essential and need to stand side by side. I see something of a model in Jack Davis's *No Sugar*. This was a collaborative play, but also, in a sense, the story of each of the Aboriginal actors and any Aboriginal person who lived at Moore River Settlement, or any place like it. Davis, working with Andrew Ross, managed to address two audiences, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, without alienating polemics. He let the hypocrisies and untruths of official history reveal themselves, in contrast with lived lives. A similar strategy is used in the recently produced play *Stolen* (reviewed Wark) in which a filing cabinet sits squarely in the centre of the stage, containing administrative versions of lives around which real lives revolve. Clem's narrative could be woven around fragments of the records that relate to his life — or perhaps he might respond directly to the records. There

are many documents that Clem has yet to see. This is what we are about to do: look at the records together. It will not be easy.

A double narrative or parallel versions of history will highlight the contradictions that characterise the lives of people like Clem, who lives in two worlds. As Boori (Monty) Prior says in *Maybe Tomorrow*:

It is hard for white people to see that we live in two worlds .... Our bodies are living the way they want us to live but our hearts and souls still stay the old way. (29)

If Clem's book can convey that contradiction, it will go a long way towards helping people like me appreciate what it means for him and those like him to maintain Aboriginal identity when the dominant culture still tends to think in terms of 'who is a real Aborigine and who isn't' (Prior 29). Clem's life has been a process of recreating what was taken away: Point Pearce and Tauondi Aboriginal Community College are his communities. Point Pearce people are his family. The land around Point Pearce is his place. His book could be a site where the wider community might meet Clem's twenty five grandchildren: all of us, waiting to read it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Exemption was one of the legislative provisions under Section 11a of the 'Aborigines' Act Amendment Act 1939. This legislation exempted from the provisions of the 'Aborigines' Act those Aboriginal people deemed capable of living in the general community without supervision. Declarations of exemption could be made by the 'Aborigines Protection' Board even if the people concerned had not applied. Exemption could be unconditional, after a three year probation period, or limited. Exemption could be used as a punitive measure and was generally regarded by Aboriginal people as offensive. Exempted people were deemed honorary whites and allowed to drink in hotels (provided they showed their papers). They were not permitted to live with non-exempted Aboriginal people or visit relatives on reserves without special permission. Aboriginal people referred to these papers as 'dog tags'.

For further information see Mattingly, *Survival in Our Own Land*, 46–53.

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