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FROM NOVELIST TO ESSAYIST: THE CHARMIAN CLIFT PHENOMENON

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

GRAHAM ROCHFORD TUCKER, B.A., M.A. (Honours)

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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

1991

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of the late

PROFESSOR GRAHAME JONES

of New England University

'Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux'

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---to my family and, in particular, to my wife Nola, SINE QUA NON.

*As this thesis was about to be printed, the death occurred of Margaret Vaile, editor of the Sydney Morning Herald women's pages in the 1960s. As her obituary (SMH, 17.12.91) noted, 'Her editorship reflected the era when women were emerging from the repressive 1950s'. Margaret Vaile was a friend and guide to Charmian Clift and she generously shared her knowledge and memories.GT.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

BAWO	Being Alone With Oneself
CSFN	Clean Straw for Nothing
EOTM	The End of the Morning
GGTG	Greener Grows The Grass
GK	Garry Kinnane
GT	Graham Tucker
HM	Honour's Mimic
I in A	Images in Aspic
Kinnane	George Johnston a Biography
MBJ	My Brother Jack
MS	Mermaid Singing
PMAL	Peel Me a Lotus
SMH	The Sydney Morning Herald
TILL	Trouble in Lotus Land
WOCC	The World of Charmian Clift
WTTPG	Walk to the Paradise Gardens

A B S T R A C T

The Charmian Clift Phenomenon occurred in Australia from 1964 to 1969 when, as a syndicated weekly columnist, Charmian Clift, with committed, highly personal, communicative writing returned the essay form 'to the Australian newspaper reading public'. She captured the hearts, imagination and loyalty of readers to an unprecedented extent and her memory is still widely revered today. Yet, seemingly at the height of her powers, this talented woman took her own life.

I examine the phenomenon, what it was and how it came about, following Clift from her birthplace Kiama, through prize-winning joint authorship with her husband George Johnston, to Kalymnos and Hydra and back to Australia. Here she found her voices in the weekly essays she produced over four years for The Sydney Morning Herald and the Melbourne Herald, giving her a significant influence on Australian reading and thinking.

Many writers, particularly in Australia, progress from journalist to novelist. In this thesis I argue that Clift's development was the reverse of this model and that the Charmian Clift Phenomenon occurred because of this change. I examine Clift's works from the prize-

winning joint novel High Valley, through the other joint novels, her personal experience books, individual novels and the My Brother Jack television series to the essays. Clift can be seen in her writing to be experimenting with different genres and these works are examined in their own right and as mines for the themes and obsessions which were to reappear in the essays.

Interviews with Margaret Vaile, J.D. Pringle and Richard Walsh illuminate the charter Clift was given in the media and the level of success she achieved. I examine the essays for form, content, style and impact and look particularly at her writing in the last year of her life, for any hint of the tragedy that was to follow. In an appendix I examine the possible reasons for this remarkable woman taking her own life. As her husband said, 'Both as a woman and as a writer Charmian Clift is worth remembering'.

INTRODUCTION

i. THE CHARMIAN CLIFT PHENOMENON

> THE WORLD OF CHARMIAN CLIFT, and a very large part of my own world, ended quite suddenly on a night in July of 1969, and with the death of this remarkable woman who had been my wife for almost twenty-four years there was also abruptly terminated a phenomenal aspect of highly personal communicative writing in Australia.[1]

From 1964 to 1969, Charmian Clift wrote a weekly column for the Sydney and Melbourne 'Heralds'. This column had such a profound effect on the lives of Australians that it can rightly be referred to as a phenomenon. In my thesis I chart Clift's course from novelist to essayist and examine the genesis, development and effect of the Charmian Clift Phenomenon.

Before the 19th November, 1964, The Sydney Morning Herald 'Women's Section' mainly contained jottings about the vacuous activities of about 400 women from the Eastern suburbs of Sydney or from various socially acceptable grazing families. On this date, with the appearance of 'Coming Home', there began a series of sophisticated and superbly written essays, dealing week by week with the human condition, always fresh, deeply personal, thought-provoking, challenging and highly entertaining. Clift's weekly column in the Sydney and Melbourne 'Heralds'

changed the face of journalism and deeply affected many of its readers. For those in Sydney, Thursdays were never the same again; it seemed as if everybody read the column and talked about it. In Melbourne, the column appeared first in the Weekend Magazine and later in the Women's Section. Wherever it appeared, it became compulsive reading for much of the literate population of the east coast of Australia. For women caught in the domestic suburban trap in particular, she provided a beacon.

The quotation at the head of this chapter was part of a poignant introduction by her husband, George Johnston, to The World of Charmian Clift, a collection of 71 of Clift's essays. This Ure Smith edition of 1970 was reprinted and later followed by editions from William Collins, Flamingo Books and Imprint. The William Collins edition was the first to contain the introduction by Martin Johnston. The Nadia Wheatley[2] review of this 1983 edition was entitled 'The phenomenal Charmian Clift'. In this review Wheatley, historian, novelist and Clift biographer, referred to the impact of Clift's essays as 'a phenomenon', adding the comment that 'Even the creator of this phenomenon was puzzled by its success'.

In this thesis I search for the origins of the Charmian Clift phenomenon in Kiama, the Greek islands and Sydney. I examine the writing leading up to the essays and the essays themselves, in order to show just what the

phenomenon was and how it came about. As Elizabeth Riddell, respected journalist, poet, writer and commentator, said: 'Since Charmian Clift, every columnist has tried to take her place. None has succeeded. Charmian Clift, there was a columnist!'[3]

Clift's development and flowering as an essayist followed a unique path. Her husband, George Johnston, provides a good example of the usual pattern, which was for a writer to move through the apprenticeship of journalism on to feature writing and, if successful, to emerge as a novelist. Johnston was the first Australian war correspondent to be appointed in World War II. As a journalist at The Argus[4], he earned the nickname of 'Golden Boy' and was promoted to the position of editor of their magazine Australasian Post, a more respected publication at that time than it is today. After moving to Sydney he had become a successful newspaper columnist by the time he and Clift wrote the prize-winning novel High Valley. In the chapter 'The Prize', I examine the importance of this novel to Clift's development. Johnston would eventually produce My Brother Jack, his great novel, after a long and painful 'apprenticeship'.

This pattern of journalist to novelist is depicted by Tom Wolfe:

> By the 1950s The Novel had become a nationwide tournament...There was no such thing as a literary journalist working for popular magazines or newspapers. If a journalist aspired to literary status - then he had better have the sense and the

> courage to quit the popular press and try to get into the big league.[5]

This is very much the way Johnston saw the situation in the 1950s when he and Clift abandoned journalism for life as writers in the Greek Islands. I examine Clift's life and literary output on the Greek Islands of Kalymnos and Hydra, for the genesis of the persona which was to enthrall and involve readers in the 1960s in Australia lay in the personal experience book Mermaid Singing, written some ten years earlier.

In the last year of her life, Clift confessed in the Autumn issue of The Australian Author[6] that she still thought of herself as a novelist. 'I was getting a bit nervous,' she said, 'about seeing any public reference to myself couched in the descriptive words "Sydney journalist Charmian Clift",' adding the disclaimer: 'not that I have anything against journalism which can be, even now, a quite honourable profession'. She went on to say that she found the labelling 'journalist' a bit claustrophobic, but her readers found no hint of this in her essays which ranged the world, often breaking new ground and cutting through previously accepted barriers week by week.

Clift knew precisely what she was doing, as is shown by a letter written to publisher David Higham in September, 1965,[7] in which she described her activities in Australia in the following terms:

> I have been making my own sneaky little revolutions ...by writing essays for the weekly presses to be

> read by people who don't know an essay from a form guide, but absolutely love it...

Were Clift's weekly 'pieces' for her column actually essays? Montaigne was certainly being ironic and showing a degree of humility when he called his brilliant and lasting compositions 'essais' or 'attempts' and thus originated the use of the term 'essay' to refer to what was to become 'a popular literary form'.[8] According to the 'Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on Historical Principles', an essay is 'a short composition on any particular subject'. The term originally was somewhat derogatory, Dr. Johnson defining an essay as 'an irregular undigested piece'. Francis Bacon used the term in much the same way when he referred to 'Essaies' as 'dispersed Meditations' and indeed, meditation is the linking factor in the construction of the English essay through its period of greatness in the 18th and 19th centuries and down to the present day.

In his appreciative monograph on William Hazlitt, J.B. Priestley set out the attributes which he felt qualified Hazlitt as an essayist.

> His main subject was not other men's work but himself, and for this reason he is best considered as an essayist. He preferred above anything else to tell us what William Hazlitt thought and felt about everything, and it is doubtful if anybody else in our literature succeeded better in this self-imposed task. After we have read him, we know Hazlitt as we know few other authors: it is as if we had sat up late with him night after night. Most of his pieces are scattered parts of some gigantic unplanned autobiography. And all this...makes him an essayist.[9]

It is surely this very personal aspect of the essayist's craft which is the most important distinguishing feature of the essay as a literary form. In the accompanying introductory chapter 'Kindred Spirits' I show that the most enduring memory readers have of the Charmian Clift phenomenon is the personal nature of her writing.

The main intellectual memory I retain from my high school days is the delight of the discovery, with a sympathetic teacher, of the English essayists, Charles Lamb in particular. I thought Lamb was speaking just to me, so acutely personal was his tone. I shall return to my old schoolbook to find what still seems to me to be a revealing definition of the literary essay:

> (Michel de Montaigne) did not write as a learned man wishing to teach, but as a man of the world whom experience and studies had filled with a wealth of wisdom and a variety of information. He had read much, travelled widely, and pondered deeply. His mind was a storehouse of what one might describe as curious but interesting lumber -- anecdotes, wise saws, strange customs, and peculiar personal opinions, combined with a knowledge of classical history and literature. This was the man who was to make a father-confessor of his books, disclosing his rich personality to the world in a way which by word of mouth would have been impossible.
>
> ...our English word <u>essay</u> (denotes) that species of short prose composition which approximates as nearly as possible to good conversation and reveals to the reader as much the writer's personality as his (or her) subject-matter.[10]

I intend to examine, section by section, to what degree the above definition can be applied to the essays of Charmian Clift.

Like Montaigne, she certainly did not write 'as a learned [person] wishing to teach'. Whenever she found herself slipping into the role of pedagogue, she excused herself and returned to the conversational or essay style: 'I seem to be preaching and I didn't really mean to'.[11] This may well have been a ploy or literary trope, particularly as her essays were addressed to an Australian audience, albeit predominantly middle-class, with the concomitant mistrust of the 'intellectual'. Self-conscious device or not, she still adopted a non-intellectual stance such as can be seen historically in the essays of Addison and Steele. The invention of Sir Roger de Coverley and his immense popularity show the advantage of this approach. Oliver Goldsmith's 'Citizen of the World' provides a further example of an apparent innocent, teaching while not appearing to teach.

Could Clift be seen 'as a [person] of the world whom experience and studies had filled with a wealth of wisdom and a variety of information'? For an Australian 'housewife and mother' in the 1960's, she was very much a person of the world in comparison with most of the people who made up her readership. Clift had actually done what most of her contemporaries only dreamed or fantasised about. Her wartime service, which culminated in her being commissioned as a lieutenant to edit the artillery corps journal, had given her an early sophistication. She had

never wanted anything else than to be a writer[12] and her writings show that Clift was a keen observer and commentator on mankind.

How then was the 'phenomenon' crafted? She had undertaken little in the nature of formal studies. Her parents, unusually erudite for people living in a small Australian country town during the 1920's and '30's, had encouraged her from early childhood to read widely in the classics, and thus began a lifetime devoted to good books. It is no accident that the Charmian Clift character, Cressida Morley, makes her first appearance in the My Brother Jack trilogy surreptitiously reading Tristram Shandy when she is supposed to be 'on duty'.[13] Clift recalled that when she was still quite young, her father had handed her a copy of Tristram Shandy with the advice: 'Read that and you're educated'.[14] Of the Johnston writing team, it was Clift who did the research.

> George Johnston was not a reader. Charmian Clift was a reader. Charmian had a good grounding in classical literature. She spent time going to original sources. She planned a book on 'The History of Civilization'. Charmian went right back to the Sumerians who invented writing. Charmian took notes at the British Museum. George used the notes.[15]

Clift had strong personal opinions on a huge variety of subjects and these were expressed, week by week, through her column. Her knowledge of classical history and literature surfaces in almost every essay, often expressed in popular form and made relevant to the time in which she

was living. Her use of classical allusion is apt and seemingly natural though not trivialised or belittled. An example comes from her essay on modern music, in which Clift treats the arrival in Sydney of the group 'The Rolling Stones' and her own children's reaction to this phenomenon. Her comment takes the form of a conversation between herself and George Johnston.

> "If music be the food of love, play on..." my husband mumbles, with, I think, commendable restraint. I remind him that Orpheus, another popular vocalist, was eventually torn to bits by his female fans. Perhaps history will repeat itself?
>
> He shudders and reminds me that the severed head of Orpheus floated across the sea from Thrace all the way to Lesbos, STILL SINGING.[16]

Clift continues the discussion and adds a personal note by referring to her own childhood when she was 'subjected to (her) father's overriding passion for Wagner'. Her sense of audience guides Clift here as she uses the device of a husband/wife discussion of the younger generation and differences in music, to make the subject accessible to her readers, many of whom will be able to identify with a husband who 'mumbles'. Most of the readers would be aware that the husband is George Johnston, the famous writer and this gives a little piquancy to the statement and allows for a frisson of recognition. The 'my husband' is only gently proprietory, used in the manner many of the readers themselves would adopt. The shudder of the husband would help to establish identification with readers, the majority of whom would be

shuddering at their own children's choice of music. The sheer wit of the classical exchange between husband and wife is enjoyably portrayed. Finally, the awful vision of the severed head of a rock star floating across the waves, STILL SINGING, is entertainingly emphasised by the use of capitals and underlining.

Clift made a 'father-confessor' of her books, revealing aspects of her family and private life. Martin Johnston stated that his 'parents' lives in most of their aspects [were] pretty much a matter of public record'.[17] This came about with his mother because of the weekly column, POL, and her radio programmes. Clift herself said, in 1969, that when she wrote, she wrote about herself.[6] She, in turn, played a 'confessor' role to much of her readership as evidenced by the amount and type of mail that came to the 'Herald' while Clift was writing her essays.[18] She wrote about these and other letters in 'On Not Answering Letters' in which she also revealed that she used to 'fancy' herself,

> rather as an eighteenth century lady of wit and charm and negligible domestic duties seated at a silk-polished escritoire...as I scribbled scribbled scribbled delicious confidences and spicy observations...[19]

The tributes after her death showed the loss of their 'confessor' to be a major cause of grief. Many women felt that they had lost someone who understood them and their problems.

An anonymous reader from Blacktown, writing in the special 'Letters to the Editor' section which had to be printed to accommodate just a selection of the letters that flowed to the 'Herald' on Clift's death, tried to sum up what the column had meant to so many readers:

> Yet for all the sense of loss and the tragedy of a life cut short there is also a profound surge of thankfulness for her life. ... Each week her column in "The Sydney Morning Herald" reached us as sanity, a different perspective, giving to thousands of us who are vegetating (as our detractors put it) as we bring future citizens into the world and raise them to the best of our ability, encouragement to widen the scope of our vision.

In the same section, a Miss J.Hogg of Beecroft wrote:

> ...she had a quality in her writing that left her readers feeling they had not so much read an article, as spent a few minutes with a valued friend.

The final part of the 'definition' comes closest to describing Clift's achievement.

> ...a species of short prose composition which approximates as nearly as possible to good conversation and reveals to the reader as much the writer's personality as his (her) subject-matter.

Miss Hogg's letter above addresses these qualities in part. George Johnston, in his foreword to <u>The World of Charmian Clift</u>, evokes Clift's inimitable and very personal style.

> Limpid and evocative prose, or long stately passages like the beat of summer surf, fitted in perfect harmony with sudden surprising slap-in-the-guts colloquialisms or abrasive wry passages of wit or memorably haunting images...[20]

J.B. Priestley's point on autobiography in the essay as mentioned in his quotation above about William Hazlitt

can be considered with reference to Clift. She was quite clear on the point of autobiography in her writing. In her article in The Australian Author, entitled 'Autobiography in the Novel', and referred to above, she expounded the autobiographical nature of her writing. Later, quoting from Conrad about art, and commenting herself, she extended this to cover writing and art generally.

> "...one illuminating and convincing quality -- the very truth of their existence.
>
> "Confronted by that enigmatical spectacle the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife, if he be deserving and fortunate, he finds the terms of his appeal."
>
> Well, in that lonely region of stress and strife, whatever the writer knows or has experienced reveals itself as a whole new world, at once an expected and an unexpected world, and that is the world he must allow to come into being.[6]

Clift allowed her world to come into being and in doing so reached out to readers in a uniquely personal manner. Her 'pieces' then, as she was wont to refer to them,[1] can seriously be regarded as 'essays'. George Johnston's summing up of his wife's achievement follows:

> Her effect on Australian journalism, I feel, was considerable, and not merely because she glitteringly returned to us the long-tarnished currency of the popular essay as a journalistic form, although this in itself was a splendid effort...She also put guts and sinew into what had been the bland formularies of the women's pages. She wrote with a graceful and highly personal style...[1]

The Charmian Clift phenomenon came about not just because of the quality of the essays, presented as they were 'with a graceful and highly personal style' but also because of the readership to which they were presented.

Australians in the 1960s were locked in to ordinariness. Conformity was expected. Middle-class mediocrity, as so clearly depicted in Donald Horne's ironic book The Lucky Country, was the norm. Labelling Australia as 'The first suburban nation' he depicted the intellectual life of the time in the following way:

> ...the Australia of the 1960s did not have a mind. Intellectual life existed but it was still fugitive. Emergent and uncomfortable, it had no established relation to 'practical life'.[21]

These were the closing years of 'the Menzies era'. Conservatism and conformity were the great virtues. Women were expected to know and keep their place. 'Kinde, Kuche, Kirche', (children, kitchen and church) provided the parameters for married women and the aspirations for those not yet married. Women were made to feel guilty for even aspiring to something beyond hearth and home. White, middle-class Australians in particular were encouraged to raise large families. 'Populate or perish!' was a much-repeated 'catch-phrase', implying that if Australians did not dramatically increase the population of their country by 'natural' means 'The faceless hordes'[22] would descend from Asia and take over Australia. This was one method of keeping women at home. Another was the still existing perception that women had obtained too much freedom during the war and that they should renounce their jobs, particularly those with power, to the men.

Into this reactionary world came the Charmian Clift

essays and they appeared in the publications which were themselves the essence of conformity. It was the vehicle for the essays, particularly the Sydney Morning Herald , which helped to bring about the 'phenomenon'. As Mary Gilmore wrote in part to Connie Robertson when she moved from the Telegraph to the 'Herald' to become editor of the 'Women's Page', 'The "Herald" gives you a standing and a prestige...'.[23] The 'Women's Page' under Robertson had been widely read, it had attracted and held major advertisers such as 'David Jones' and was an important part of Australia's prestige newspaper,[24] ensuring that Clift's first essay had a wide readership.

This first essay, 'Coming Home', had immediate impact.[18] Clift came to the column as an experienced, sophisticated and skilful writer. There was nothing halting, apologetic or self-effacing in the presentation. She had already found her 'voices' and she seized the opportunity to speak to a wide and almost immediately appreciative audience.

In this thesis I examine the genesis, development and flowering of the persona Clift presented in the essays. That it was a persona is not in doubt though at the time of her writing, the persona and personality were probably seen by readers to be the same. Clift's personality and people's perceptions of her as a person were integral to the 'phenomenon'. Ruth Park says of Clift's essays:

They have that rare quality that makes some writers

> beloved - though they may not be top quality - and others close to genius totally disregarded. One reads her pieces saying: "Yes, that's so, I've felt that way exactly, that's me all right."
> This is what matters...Here is a real person speaking, and speaking to me.[25]

Park says further that this accounts for the reason why, when Clift died,

> thousands couldn't believe it, bombarded the Herald with inquiries and sent the switchboard berserk. How could she be dead when they were still alive and this identification existed?[25]

Clift was the writer for the times. Everything about her seemed exotic in those drab days of conformity in Australia. A novelist herself, she was married to the famous war correspondent who was enjoying success with the enduring My Brother Jack. She had raised a family on remote Greek islands in what was seen as a 'bohemian' milieu. There were memories of the Johnstons and their 'set' in the Sydney of the early fifties before they went overseas as, it seemed, all talented Australians had to do. Garry Kinnane evokes that time through Neil Hutchison's depiction of the charismatic Johnstons and their 'magnetic capacity to attract people to them'.[26] Clift retained that presence. She was, or had been, a 'beauty'...Miss PIX Beach Girl. Stories of the Johnstons had come back to Australia through the years of their absence. There had been the occasional magazine article or media reference to them through the years and their books, if not always financially successful, had kept them in the

public notice. And they had come back to Australia, permanently. In the Australia of the 1960s the expatriate was often resented and the returning prodigal forgiven, envied and feted.

Clift was seen as cosmopolitan, travelled, experienced, rebellious of the restrictions her fellows took for granted, iconoclastic, and sophisticated. Yet many felt that she wrote personally for them and said things they wanted to hear. And she could write.

> Limpid and evocative prose, or long stately passages like the beat of summer surf, fitted in perfect harmony with sudden surprising slap-in-the-guts colloquialisms or abrasive wry passages of wit or memorably haunting images: in the one sentence Wagner and a currently favoured pop group jostled shoulders or the metaphysical poets shared the wall with some bawdy graffiti. There were very few of her pieces that did not leave you with a sting at the end, or something to ponder over for a long time. She was very much an original.[1]

In charting Clift's course from novelist to essayist, I follow her from Kiama to Europe, to the islands of Kalymnos and Hydra and back to Sydney. I examine her major works, the joint novels, individual novels, personal experience books and the ten-part television series, My Brother Jack. In the last year of her life Clift was a feature writer for POL magazine, writing a monthly article at the same time as she produced her weekly column. Through interviews, examination and analysis of the writing of Clift the essayist in the 'Heralds' and POL magazine I present the Charmian Clift Phenomenon, what it

was and how it came about. In an appendix I examine the question of why this writer, 'so vibrantly alive', should have taken her own life.

> Both as a woman and as a writer Charmian Clift is worth remembering.[1]

NOTES: THE CHARMIAN CLIFT PHENOMENON

1. WOCC, 'Introduction by George Johnston'.
2. The National Times, September 30 to October 6, 1983, p.31.
3. Elizabeth Riddell, Panel Discussion on 'Journalism as Writing', ASAL Conference, Griffith University, 10 July, 1990.
4. cf. Kinnane, p.38.
5. Tom Wolfe, The New Journalism, (Pan Books, London, 1990, first published 1973) p.21.
6. Charmian Clift, 'Autobiography in the Novel', The Australian Author, (Autumn Issue, April, 1969) pp.3-6.
7. cf. Kinnane, p.251.
8. cf.H. Barnes, ed. Essays Old and New (Harrap, Sydney, first published in Australia, 1947).
9. J.B.Priestley, Hazlitt, (Longmans, Green & Co., 1960) p.6.
10. Essays Old and New, introduction, p. 12.
11. WOCC, 'Come off it Kids!' 21.3.68, p.238.
12. cf. 'Radio Helicon', ABC Radio, first transmitted, 14.7.86, reel one of four.
13. MBJ, p.340.
14. Hazel de Berg interview, DeB 105.
15. Mungo Macallum senior, reported to GT by Max Brown, interview, 1988.
16. I in A, p. 52.
17. Hazel de Berg interview, DeB 1166.
18. Margaret Vaile interview. GT, 1989.
19. SMH. 26.9.68.
20. WOCC, p.12.
21. Donald Horne, The Lucky Country Revisited, (Dent, Melbourne, 1987) p. 18.
22. cf. pp.109-10 where Horne discusses the stereotyped attitudes of Australians to Asia during the 1960s.
23. cf. chapter, this thesis, 'The Women Columnists'.
24. During 1991 the future of the Fairfax publishing empire is being decided. Readers describe the 'Herald' in terms such as the following from Roby Tidswill of Hunters Hill: 'our most important source of news in this information-dependent age'.(SMH, 21.10.91)
25. Ruth Park, 'Nothing But Writers', The Independent Monthly', September, 1989, pp. 32-3.
26. Kinnane, p.100.

INTRODUCTION

ii. KINDRED SPIRITS

In March, 1989, I placed a small advertisement in The Australian Women's Weekly asking readers to let me know what they remembered of the writings of Charmian Clift. I was not seeking information about the writer herself, I wanted readers to share their reactions to Charmian Clift's writings even though she had been dead for twenty years, most of her books were still out of print, and her journalistic writings, by their very nature, should have tended towards the ephemeral.

The response was instant. I received phone calls and letters, some of them expansive. The overwhelming impression was that readers still felt they had had a personal relationship with Charmian Clift. Many mentioned the shock to them on hearing of her death. The following is typical:

> As soon as I read your notice a warm flood of memory came to me re. the writer Charmian Clift...Thursday's S.M.H. Women's Page was always special as that was the day Charmian's essays and articles appeared. The thing I remember most was that her writings dealt with such a wide range of thoughts and situations appreciated and understood by the reader. The words that I think would describe them best would be vital and thought-provoking.

> They made one think, dream and realize how good life was, especially in our everyday experiences. ([Mrs] Hazel Bath, Molong)

Unice Macfarlane of Matraville wrote, 'When I heard of her tragic death I felt she had been a member of my family'. A similar sense of personal loss was conveyed even more dramatically by Lois Owen of Burragate who remembers 'weeping for hours after reading the Herald that morning'. She wrote of Clift's continuing effect on her and her attitude to life. Ms Owen identifies with Clift, describing her as a continuing presence and her work as timeless.

> I guess she also showed me how to use my eyes more productively, learning to see people and objects in a new light.
>
> Her 'Images in Aspic' (with the beautiful cover photo of her) is often opened and browsed through. It's a timeless work as the things that made her jump up and down then still seem to exist.
>
> I am writing this by gas lamp in my 'muddy' on a bush block. Ms Clift is good company and I think would enjoy the beauty and solitude.

This feeling of being inspired by Clift's writings occurs with other correspondents. Charlotte Mohring of Babinda, Queensland, drew inspiration from Peel me a Lotus.

> Peel me a Lotus was the very first book I read after arriving in Darwin in 1958. We had uprooted ourselves from an isolated farm in Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe. There was husband, wife and four small children.
> The descriptions of life on a Greek Island amused me greatly. I felt here was a kindred spirit (my underlining, GT) who loved adventure, things and people new, and an assertion of equality. Both, husband and wife, sharing the typewriter and chores. If SHE could start life anew so could I. If SHE could learn to like the people around her, so could I. If SHE could keep her sense of the ridiculous, so could I. If SHE could still be creative herself, so could I. She did, and I did.

Mrs. Shirley Hoskins of North Bondi wrote of being 'an avid reader of her weekly column'. This reader raised the issue of feminism with regard to Clift's writing, telling how she had written to Clift, complimenting her 'on an article she wrote on women and our hopes for the future'. Clift's reply to the letter was uplifting for her.

> I remember her reply to me, I kept it for years, it was brief but she more or less said -- we are the converted -- keep on hoping for change as society will eventually accept equal rights for women.

Doreen Wale of Mittagong stated that while she had several of Clift's books, she would reply to my question about what she remembered about 'Charmian's work' without referring to the books. Her brief but eloquent answer encompasses many of the aspects of Clift's writing that have remained with readers.

> I suppose the most obvious of her skills as a writer that appealed to me was the 'readability' of her work. Though one sensed a well-read author with a wide background knowledge, Charmian's essays never sounded 'academic', were never self-consciously verbose. The words she used were, in the main, ordinary, everyday words -- yet how cleverly she used them to draw word pictures of people and places. With this skill, and her remarkable insight, she drew vividly detailed mental images of the world around her. After all these years, I can still conjure up my 'pictures' of an elderly neighbour, and of her mother, as she described them in two of her essays.
>
> Yet I think perhaps it is Charmian's personality reflected in her work, which has won her so many admirers - including myself! Throughout her essays one senses a woman of warmth and understanding; down-to-earth; accepting without judging; aware and appreciative of the simple, ordinary things of everyday life. Without rhetoric, she could express eloquently thoughts and feelings that were identical to one's own - how many times I caught myself nodding

in agreement as I read her opinions on teenagers, weddings and so on!

In this typically emotional yet perceptive letter, this reader has evoked the Clift persona: 'a woman of warmth and understanding; down-to-earth; accepting without judging; aware and appreciative of the simple ordinary things of everyday life'. She has also identified a major feature of the Charmian Clift Phenomenon: 'she could express eloquently thoughts and feelings that were identical to one's own'.

Mrs Joy Wilkinson of Armadale, Victoria, was brought to the conclusion, after reading Clift's work, that "there really isn't a 'them' and an 'us'". The Australian fear of the intellect or mistrust of the intellectual was thus being broken down through the essays. The reader felt that 'The Johnstons are people like me' and that 'one's life could change if one was prepared to make change'.

Several of the respondents made a point of saying that they did not normally read the 'Women's Weekly' but just happened on it the month my notice was included or had it drawn to their attention. They seemed nevertheless to have been regular readers of the Clift column. One such reader is Maureen Cook of Northgate, Queensland who stressed the fact that, at the time of the 'Herald' essays, she was 'a young housewife and mother of several young children', 'housebound'. Maureen Cook describes the impact of Clift's work against the background of the time.

> I can remember looking forward to those weekly pieces because they seemed to me at the time a breakthrough in what often passed for 'news for women' in the Women's Section of the S.M.H.
>
> Women's Pages, Magazines and Radio Shows about that time were didactic; we were told what to wear, how to behave, think and above all, how to 'please our man', so it was rejuvenating to read 'real' writing in the women's pages.

The Editor and the Managing Director of the 'Sydney Morning Herald' had employed Clift precisely because they were aware that the Women's Section was very limited and "sexist".[1] Maureen Cook's recollections of that time seem to indicate that the Clift 'experiment' worked. She goes on to explain what she understands by 'real writing', writing that is witty, thoughtful and warm. In her opinion, Clift represented 'the new woman...one who was sophisticated, travelled and successful'. Others saw Clift very much as 'the woman next door'. Maureen Cook then repeats what became a theme through all the responses: 'She possibly articulated what a lot of men and women were thinking'.

Robin Barker of Queensland wrote in the same vein, stressing the very personal nature of Clift's writing.

> Her essays lit up my day and would stay in my mind until the following week when I could read her again. She had such empathy and I always wished I could have known her for she seemed a special kind of person. I was in my thirties then and had three small children. Over the years I have read much and deeply, but I will always feel that her death was a great loss to me personally, for I have missed her visits through the newspaper ever since.

Dianne Boenkendorf of Tumut, New South Wales,

remembers seeing Clift as a sort of mother-confessor or guide to life. She describes clearly how, when she was a young married woman, she eagerly awaited Thursday's 'Herald' each week.

> It was as if someone who was older, wiser and more experienced was speaking directly to me, giving me new points of view and plenty of stimulating ideas to think about...For a young woman like myself who had had a very narrow and sheltered upbringing, she opened my mind to different values and attitudes which until then would never have been part of my experience.

She also refers to Clift's 'very personal style' and goes on to state that as a direct result of Clift's essays she continues today to consider 'alternative options to what is generally expected by the rest of society'.

Despite her protestations at being unable to express herself, Elizabeth Curline, a painter of Killarney Heights, New South Wales, states what Clift's writings meant to so many people.

> Those of us who don't have the capacity to put our thoughts into words very occasionally encounter a writer who, it seems, expresses our inner thoughts, insights and philosophies exactly as one would, had one the ability.
>
> I always felt that I had met via the written word a kindred spirit or "soul-mate".

Speaking of Clift's suicide, Elizabeth Curline says that she made her own deduction 'that such a sensitive all-seeing soul simply found life overwhelming'. All respondents who spoke of Clift's death referred to their 'sense of personal loss'.

I received only one unsigned letter. This bore the

pen-name 'housewife'. The writer seemed to be berating Clift, through me, for taking her own life in order to somehow punish her husband and in so doing hurt her 'poor orphaned children'. This no doubt provides another side to the 'Charmian Clift phenomenon'. 'Housewife' must necessarily represent a restricted minority view, but the letter provided further evidence of the strong impact of Clift through her essays. I will show, in the chapters dealing with the essays, that the Clift persona was a construct. 'Housewife' appears to have seen through the construct to the reality.

Phone calls covered much the same ground as the above letters with the exception of the anonymous letter, reiterating a sense of personal loss after Clift's death and expressing the feeling that Clift was speaking directly to them in her weekly essays.

These women, and presumably very many others during the latter half of the 1960s, felt they had a personal relationship with Clift as a direct result of her writing. Thursday's 'Herald' had a special meaning because of the weekly essay column. Clift was 'good company' for women who, because of the very repressive nature of suburban life in Australia at the time, had very little intelligent adult company. Many of them felt she had been one of the family. Her death was a tragic and deeply felt loss but her influence continues, one migrant woman seeing Clift's

inspiration as the reason for persevering in an alien country.

Clearly, the personal nature of Clift's writing, her 'personality reflected in her work' as one reader expressed it, is important to her continuing admirers. This was a 'breakthrough in what often passed for "news for women"'. Many young women readers must have felt 'as if someone who was older, wiser and more experienced was speaking directly to [them]'.

In the process of tracing her development from a novelist to a major columnist, this thesis will examine the 'Charmian Clift phenomenon' which is remembered and appreciated by readers some twenty years after her death. This 'breakthrough' of personal 'communicative' writing did not just happen. Clift's apprenticeship which led up to the weekly column, was vastly different from and indeed the reverse of what can be seen as 'normal' for a newspaper writer.

From prize-winning joint novelist, as an individual writer and novelist, through the seminal 'personal experience' books and the overpoweringly important relationship with husband George Johnston, I will trace the emergence of the 'Herald' essayist and the Charmian Clift phenomenon.

NOTE

1. See beginning of chapter 'Thursday's Herald'.

I. THURSDAY'S HERALD:

CHARMIAN CLIFT AND THE NEW JOURNALISM

> The suggestion was first made by Mr. Angus McLachlan, then Managing Director of the "Herald" and I was delighted by the idea. We both had read some of her work, and thought she would attract our readers.... We thought it would broaden the appeal of the Women's Section which was then very limited and "sexist".[1]

On Thursday, November 19, 1964, the following announcement, accompanied by a photograph of Charmian Clift, appeared in the Women's Section of The Sydney Morning Herald.

> CHARMIAN CLIFT WRITES FOR "HERALD"
>
> Charmian Clift has just returned to Australia with her husband, novelist George Johnston, and her three children after 15 years abroad -- 10 of them on the Aegean islands of Kalymnos and Hydra.
>
> Charmian Clift collaborated with her husband on two successful novels, The Big Chariot and The Sponge Divers.
>
> Among her own books are Walk to the Paradise Gardens, Honour's Mimic, Mermaid Singing and Peal(sic) me a Lotus. She has also written books on travel.
>
> In this and coming articles she will bring to readers her sharp observations of people and things in Australia and other places, and her opinions on a host of controversial subjects.

Not inappropriately, Clift's essay, printed alongside this announcement, was headed 'Has The Old Place Really Changed?'

An interesting omission from the 'Herald'

announcement and 'potted history' is any reference to High Valley. This novel, the first and most important collaboration by Clift and Johnston, had won for them the first prize in the 'Herald's' 1948 Novel Competition which the 'Herald' itself on 8th May, 1948 had described as 'AUSTRALIA'S greatest literary competition'. It is also interesting that, according to the announcement, Clift was expected to give her opinions on 'a host of controversial subjects'. John Douglas Pringle, Editor of the 'Herald' at that time, has made it quite clear that Clift was given no guidelines as to what she should write in her 'column'.[1] According to Margaret Vaile, then Editor of the Women's Section of the 'Herald', 'The whole arrangement was 'rather loose, as journalistic things were in those days...no contracts or anything like that'.[2] Miss Vaile's account of the beginning of the weekly column is as follows:

> J.D. Pringle said: 'Maggie, I've done something over the weekend -- hired Charmian Clift to write a column. I went over your head.'[2]

When Margaret Vaile later asked Pringle whether there should be any restrictions on what Clift wrote in her column, he replied: 'Why should there be?' Pringle said further that:

> Charmian's column was only one of many ideas Mr. McLachlan and I had for lightening and improving the 'Herald'. It was the beginning of a slow but deliberate reform.[1]

This was the mid 1960's, The Women's Pages of 'The

Herald' in particular had little content of literary merit. This is dealt with in the later chapter, 'The Women Journalists'. Women's journalism up to and through World War II had been healthy and invigorating, but in the post-war years there had been strong forces at work to 'put women back in their place', to reclaim the areas of power that had been ceded to women during the war. Thus the themes of domesticity, respectability and snobbery came to dominate the Women's Pages, ruled in the 'Herald's' case by Connie Robertson. Her influence was so strong that such a thing as a Charmian Clift column could not have been considered during Robertson's editorship. The column was an immediate success.

The ideas of Pringle and McLachlan for 'lightening and improving' their newspaper were part of a world-wide trend at that time. Although the term 'The New Journalism' has been much misused, the aims expounded by Pringle and put into practice by Clift conform to what was understood by the term at that time.[3] I argue that it makes sense to see Clift as a 'new journalist'.

> It was a time when old values were breaking down; new knowledge exploded all around us; people worried about drugs, hippies, and war. We talked of violence, urban disorder, turmoil. (topics dealt with in Clift's essays. GT) New terms like polarization, credibility gap and counter-culture crept into the language. It was during <u>this</u> time, somewhere between 1960 and 1970, that the term "new journalism" also began to appear in the popular press.[3]

In 1973 Tom Wolfe looked back on this time, with

particular reference to America. With E.W. Johnson, Wolfe compiled an anthology of The New Journalism and in the Preface Wolfe relates how he intended to write five or six pages of introduction to go with the twenty or so examples of the genre. He finished up writing a long introduction, one that has become important particularly to students of journalism during and since the 1960's. Wolfe's aim was to state precisely "-- in terms of technique -- (what) has made the New Journalism as 'absorbing' and 'gripping' as the novel and the short story and often more so."[4] Wolfe used the introduction to make an attack on fiction writers and he summed up his argument in this way:

> I don't really expect any of the current set of fiction writers to take note of what I've just said. In a way, I suppose, I'm even banking on their obtuseness. Fiction writers, currently, are busy running backward, skipping and screaming, into a begonia patch that I call Neo-Fabulism. I analyse it in some detail in an appendix. I must confess that the retrograde state of contemporary fiction has made it far easier to make the main point of this book: that the most important literature being written in America today is in nonfiction, in the form that has been tagged, however ungracefully, the New Journalism.[4]

Wolfe is talking specifically about America and he takes the point much further than is appropriate to the Australian scene. Nevertheless there are important points of similarity. Clift began in the mid 1960's writing a syndicated weekly essay for the women's section of a leading Australian newspaper. This section of the paper in particular had hitherto been devoid of anything

approaching literary merit. Such articles as appeared in the section did not normally carry by-lines; the recipes, household hints and endless social jottings were printed week after week with a studied objectivity and any reporting was normally in the third person. Clift brought subjectivity to journalism at a time when, apparently, there was an international shift towards this type of approach to non-fiction and there were also writers equipped and ready to write subjectively. Wolfe expressed the shift as a discovery.

> And yet in the early 1960's a curious new notion, just hot enough to inflame the ego, had begun to intrude into the tiny confines of the feature statusphere. It was in the nature of a discovery. This discovery, modest at first, humble, in fact, deferential, you might say, was that it just might be possible to write journalism that would...read like a novel. Like a novel, if you get the picture. This was the sincerest form of homage to The Novel and to those greats, the novelists, of course...[5]

From an international point of view then, given the date of appearance of the essays and the immediate adoption of a form and style that was to continue virtually for the five years or so of their appearance, Clift's essays may be seen to be in the forefront of the "new journalism", appearing spontaneously at about the time that similar writings were appearing in the American press. One of the problems with the term 'new journalism' is that of definition, as the term came to mean other things such as 'underground journalism'. Everette E. Dennis finds Tom Wolfe's definition of "new journalism"

suitable and it has points which can be applied to Clift's work at this time:

> ...it is the use by people writing non-fiction of techniques which heretofore had been thought of as confined to the novel or the short story, to create in one form both the kind of objective reality of journalism and the subjective reality that people have always gone to the novel for.[3]

Clift had already used the techniques of subjective realism in her two 'personal experience' books so that she was by now working with a literary mode with which she felt comfortable. Her writing of Mermaid Singing and Peel me a Lotus combined with her earlier journalistic work to give her the necessary skills for weekly essay production. In the Hazel De Berg interview, recorded on 8th June, 1965, Clift refers to her early journalistic experiences. Her first job was as writer/editor for the Army Ordnance corps who were, she explains,

> running their own little magazine at this stage and they asked me to write it for them, which I did and found that I could do it very well, and I loved doing it.

Her next job was as a reporter on the Melbourne 'Argus'. She goes on to describe this as 'the most wonderful period of my life' and also says in the same interview: 'As far as being a writer is concerned, since I've come back I'm not at all sure that I'm a novelist at all'. Clift enthuses about the more immediate media, newspapers, television and radio, and concludes with: 'I think I want to go ahead and explore every exciting

possibility that this country offers'. So Clift was ready to return to journalism but it was as a far more experienced writer. Working in collaboration with Johnston and on her own, she had developed a style and found a personal subjective form of writing that was particularly suited to the climate of the mid 1960s. Clift had the talent and experience necessary to 'write journalism that would...read like a novel' and she was ready to bring new journalism to Australian readers.

In his brilliant satirical work Myra Breckinridge, written in the late sixties, Gore Vidal deals with the idea of 'the death of the novel' and of non-fiction written in the way fiction had been hitherto presented. There is a line through the satire which parallels Clift's 'Herald' attempts and achievements.

> The novel being dead, there is no point to writing made-up stories. Look at the French who will not and the Americans who cannot. Look at me who ought not, if only because I exist entirely outside the usual human experience... outside and yet wholly relevant for I am the New Woman whose astonishing history is a poignant amalgam of vulgar dreams and knife-sharp realities...Yet not even I can create a fictional character as one-dimensional as the average reader. Nevertheless, I intend to create a literary masterpiece in much the same way that I created myself, and for much the same reason: because it is not there. And I shall accomplish this by presenting you, the reader...with an exact, literal sense of what it is like, from moment to moment, to be me.[6]

In April, 1969 in her article for The Australian Author, Clift wrote:

> And one of the questions they always ask is, "What is your novel about?". It gives me great pleasure to look my questioner straight in the eye and put on a

dead-pan face and reply nonchalantly: "Me".[7]

Clift's subjectivity, the autobiographical nature of her successful writing, was deliberate and, given her nature and talents and the times in which she worked, probably inevitable.

The offer to write the weekly column for the 'Herald' came at the right time for Clift, and Pringle chose well. This is not to say that Pringle and Clift were following a trend. Certainly for Australia they were, if anything, setting a trend, albeit at so high a standard as to make imitation difficult. They were translating to a new and very wide audience the intimate and personal style of the essay. Accidentally, as I am arguing, they were in the forefront of the 'New Journalism'. George Johnston, one of Australia's most efficient, accomplished and experienced journalists, described the uniqueness of Clift's achievement.

> She was very much an original. Nobody else could adopt the exact stance of her viewpoint any more than they could imitate her style. (I tried to once when she was very sick with pneumonia and I thought I could 'ghost' her column for her. I struggled for half a day with the first paragraph before abandoning the task as hopeless. She sat up in bed with her typewriter on a tray and feverishly wrote her piece. A very good piece, too.)[8]

This phenomenon can be seen as a consequence of the 'new journalism'. Previously almost any good reporter could take over any article half-way and finish it. TIME magazine prided itself at this time that the style of the

magazine was the same from cover to cover. By-lines were very rare. One of the problems with studying newspaper writing at this time is that most articles were printed anonymously.[9]

It is most important, as referred to above, that Clift was already a writer when she began the 'Herald' column. That is why Pringle chose her: she was a novelist who had worked her craft. The two 'personal experience' books, Mermaid Singing and Peel me a Lotus had provided the perfect grounding for the involved, personal and subjective writing she would produce in the column.

This grounding in her craft is important in the Australian scene. Patrick White's jibe about 'the Great Australian Emptiness...in which the schoolmaster and journalist rule what intellectual roost there is...'[10] had been made in 1962. White was stating that most Australian writers were 'part-timers' who drifted into writing novels from other full-time occupations. His criticism is widely aimed but does not include himself. Clift however, by serving her 'apprenticeship' in the novel, broke the pattern and brought a freshness and vitality to the newspaper that was instantly recognised by the readers.

In the Foreword quoted above, Johnston refers to what he calls 'the exact stance of her viewpoint' and it is indeed this viewpoint or subjectivity that makes Clift's achievement unique. In Images in Aspic, the

genesis of which is discussed later in this chapter, Johnston attempts to account for the amazing popularity of the Clift essays. He finds the answer in her style:

> Charmian Clift writes thoughtfully and carefully. She is concerned with style, elegance, choice of the exact word. She often writes very long, un-journalistic sentences. She takes time to muse, to reflect, to drift through experience. If this is daily journalism it is very different from anything in my experience.[11]

Jill Kitson's review of the 1990 Imprint new edition of The World of Charmian Clift[12] carries the title 'The Accomplished Columnist'. Kitson outlines Clift's achievement, states how much Clift loved the column and accounts for its immense following. She feels that readers 'probably... appreciated the same qualities in her writing that had led...Pringle...to give her a free hand'. She seems to see Clift's style and subjectivity as conversational in a very special sense.

> Charmian Clift comes across as a writer who believed in talk as a civilised and civilising pursuit; who believed that, if she put her mind to it, even the most ephemeral topic could be made to yield insights into the scheme of things.

Readers certainly felt that Clift was speaking to each of them personally. Martin Johnston described this when explaining what he saw as the 'Charmian Clift persona': 'friend talking to friend...I'm having a chat to you over the garden fence...'.[13] Kitson speaks of 'the vivacity of Clift's intellect and imagination that engages the reader'. Very much the 'ecrivain engage', she combined

subjectivity with commitment. In discussing the present state of newspaper columns Kitson accounts further for Clift's success.

> Not long after Charmian Clift died, women's pages disappeared from the metropolitan newspapers, but weekly columnists did not. Most broadsheets employ two or three, each attempting the sort of conversational essay Clift excelled at, none of them comparable to her. Given half a page instead of a column, the thoughts of Phillip Adams and Max Harris ramble unedited and rarely reach a satisfying conclusion. From others we get a too predictable weekly blast of righteous indignation or shot of wry, self-deprecating wit. What's missing are the originality, the optimism, the open-mindedness Clift shared with her readers.[12]

One of the earliest 'Herald' essays (17th December, 1964) bears clear evidence of 'the new journalism'. Clift had given the essay a traditional 'essay' title: 'On Saving Sevenpence', but the 'Herald' editors, perhaps unsure of the sophistication of their readers, had changed it for publication to the more objective 'Supermarkets'. 'The Herald' represented merely a part of the whole patronising attitude of the media to women, particularly through the fifties and well into the sixties, when many held that 'Kinde, Kuche, Kirche' were enough to occupy women.

When the essay appeared in Images in Aspic, its editor, George Johnston, made sure that the essay reverted to its original, more subjective title. In discussions with 'Herald' readers (in 1988-9) this essay was often mentioned by women in particular as having a profound

effect on them and their perception of what was happening in marketing in the mid- 1960's. The essay consists of an extended comparison of the modern supermarket with an Eastern Bazaar. A leit-motif of free coffee for the duped 'expert haggler' at the Eastern Bazaar develops into Clift's closure, 'When the supermarkets start serving free coffee I'll know I'm being had'. 'CHOICE' magazine could have tackled the same topic but without the impact of Clift, in control of her style, sure of herself and of her audience.

With anecdote, personal experience and commentary, Clift develops her theme that the so-called 'specials' in supermarkets are merely contrived. She deals with the topic in a subjective way, presenting herself as the 'naive' or 'innocent abroad' who mistakenly puts her trust in those with whom she does business. Clift has thus updated a device regularly employed by earlier essayists such as Addison, Goldsmith and Twain.

Much has been written and spoken about price manipulation in the years since then but this essay was a very early revelation of the merchandising practices of the modern supermarket. Clift's subjective approach, presenting herself as one of the 'also-duped', involved the readers, helping them to see what was really happening. She deals with the extortion from the customer's point of view, saying 'This is what is

happening to you; this is what is happening to us.' Clift does not just present the facts about price manipulation as reportage. She is a housewife, and in this case writes as one, experiencing the frustrations of manipulative marketing and exposing the tricks with the clever and interesting comparison with the Eastern bazaar. 'The Herald' saw the essay as a statement about supermarkets and merely labelled it accordingly. It was to be some time before they came to terms with the fact that they had an essayist writing for them. Readers, however, realised that something special was happening in the newspaper and Clift knew that she was more than a journalist. In 1969, after writing her 'Herald' essays for nearly five years, she made this comment about herself and journalism:

> I was getting a bit nervous about seeing any public reference to myself couched in the descriptive words "Sydney journalist Charmian Clift" -- not that I've anything against journalism, which can be, even now, a quite honorable profession.[7]

According to Margaret Vaile, the reader response and reaction to Clift's column was immediate and continuous. The routine was as follows: a car from the 'Herald' would go to Neutral Bay, then later to Raglan Street, Mosman, (the Johnston residence) to pick up the column on Saturday afternoons. This seems to have been very special treatment indeed. Apparently 'phone-in' facilities for journalists were well in place by then and their use was 'the norm'.[14] It was clearly important that Clift's actual typescript

should be brought to the office. Margaret Vaile would then carry out what she describes as her 'most pleasant task of the week', reading and sub-editing the Clift copy, and putting in 'cross-heads'. According to Miss Vaile, there were rarely any changes made. The copy was widely spaced, and though it was the result of several drafts, there would still be evidence of Clift's striving, up to the last moment, for a better word or clearer, neater expression. The sub-edited copy would then be set 'on the stone' in the compositing room. It was this edited copy that was sent to Melbourne for the Melbourne Herald.

The column appeared in Thursday morning's 'Herald'. The phone calls from readers would come in every Thursday and there was always correspondence. There were various types of letters but the general theme was that Clift had said what the reader himself or herself had been thinking but had been unable to express properly. Vaile mentioned that, even though the column appeared in the Women's Section, many letters came from male readers. Clift's writing had achieved a universal appeal and this was summed up by George Johnston.

> She believed, as I say, in humanity, with its problems and dilemmas, its hopes and aspirations, its inextinguishable will and courage. Through everyday evocations she was able to make these complex abstracts articulate and understandable. During the four and a half years she was writing for newspapers the most common expression used in the thousands of letters she received from her readers was to the effect that 'this is exactly what I have always felt, but I've never been able to quite put it into words,

> and now you've summed it all up for me so beautifully....'[8]

The 'Herald' essays began at the end of 1964 and in 1965 Images in Aspic, published by Horwitz, appeared. It was a collection of thirty-six of the 'Herald' essays, printed at the Griffin Press in South Australia, and it was an immediate success. The title of the book came from one of the essays, which had appeared in the paper on 18th March, 1965 and had, unusually, retained in publication the title given to it by Clift.

Of the fifteen 'Herald' essays which appeared before 'Images in Aspic', only two had retained in publication the title that Clift had given them herself. The book, Images in Aspic, was edited by George Johnston and carried an introduction by him in which he gave a version of how J.D. Pringle had employed Clift to write the essays. He stressed that Pringle

> was not looking for a woman journalist, but a writer. The daily press needed some writing, real writing, from a woman's point of view...[11]

Johnston went on to explain that the book was a response to requests from 'Many hundreds of readers, from all states...' and said that 'as an old journalist' he endorsed the suggestion. He said further that Clift 'took the bold step of assuming that women readers of newspapers were of a high standard of intelligence and sensitivity'. He then commented immediately that the readership among men had been almost as great as among women, 'if the

letters received are reasonable criteria'.

Charmian Clift died in July, 1969. A second collection of her essays was published in 1970 with an introduction by George Johnston, written after her death. He tried to summarise what his wife's column had meant to so many Australians.

> ...there was also abruptly terminated a phenomenal aspect of highly personal communicative writing in Australia.
>
> I say 'communicative' advisedly, because if one thing was revealed by the unprecedented public tributes and the months-long spate of private and deeply felt testimonies of sadness and loss which followed my wife's death, it was that in her weekly newspaper writings Charmian Clift had come to mean something important and personal to a very great number of Australian people.
>
> By this I mean more than the mere fact that the audience for her weekly newspaper essays probably numbered a million or more readers; what was significant was that to an extraordinarily large number of these readers she had become almost a magical personality in a kind of talismanic way.[8]

Johnston went on to quote from readers' responses and from the writer-critic Allan Ashbolt who attempted to 'find the secret of Charmian Clift's writing magic -- her instinctive and total commitment to humanity'.

In 1983, Collins produced another edition of <u>The World of Charmian Clift</u> and this time added a further introduction by Martin Johnston. More than ten years after the death of both his parents, Martin Johnston described just what his mother did in the field of the essay and attempted to account for 'the Charmian Clift phenomenon'.

> The essay was a form as new to her, when she undertook to produce one weekly for the <u>Sydney Morning Herald's</u> Women's Page in the mid sixties, as

> it was at least (at) the level she immediately achieved -- to the Australian newspaper reading public. Indeed it was a form that had never been particularly cultivated here, except perhaps by Walter Murdoch.
>
> As it turned out, it suited her particular combination of gifts uniquely well. She had a mind -- I make no qualitative comparisons -- not unlike Montaigne's. She was ready to look at everything and listen to anyone (indeed, she couldn't help doing either) and also to listen to herself. She had a vast range of what used to be called 'curious learning', especially of the sort she most loved: that of Shakespeare, Donne, Burton, Aubrey, Browne and Sterne. She wrote an English that in its love of the long, complicated yet ringing sentence went straight back to those favourite antecedents; brought a new kind of literacy to the Australian press; and, if it occasionally 'went over the top' did so in the manner of Hokusai's Wave, with strength and grace.

In one of Clift's 'Croxley' notebooks, preserved in the National Library, I found the following list: 'Ten best books or books which have most influenced me.' Under Item three, immediately following 'Collected works of Wm. Shakespeare', Clift has written: 'Montaigne's Essays (because I've never read them)'. Clift explained this cryptic comment in the De Berg interview, saying that her father 'went on so much' about Montaigne that she stubbornly refused to read him. Certainly she read and enjoyed and to some extent emulated the other writers mentioned by her son or included in her list.

That Clift knew what she was doing can be illustrated by the form of her essays and, even more obviously, by the titles she gave to them. One traditional method of giving a title to an essay is to use the word 'on...'. Examples among many are Oliver Goldsmith's 'On Dress' or William

Hazlitt's 'On Fashion', and, more recently, Jerome K. Jerome's 'On Being Hard Up' and G.K.Chesterton's 'On Running After One's Hat'. One assumes that the essayists gave these titles to their own essays. From the beginning of the appearance of the Clift 'pieces' in the 'Herald' until the 21st of July, 1966, Clift used the word 'On' to begin her 'piece' seventeen times. The 'Herald' changed all these titles in publication. In one instance, where Clift's title of 'On time to Kill' was changed to 'On doing Nothing' they left in the 'essay' beginning 'On'. In one other instance they changed the Clift title of 'We Three Kings of Orient Aren't' to 'On Not Being Bothered', introducing the 'On' themselves. It can thus be assumed that the 'Herald' slowly came to the realisation that their columnist knew what she was doing and that the readership was quite ready to accept an essayist in the Women's Pages.

Clift herself apparently tired of having her titles changed and she did not use the 'On' beginning again until 22nd June, 1967, in the poignant, and possibly self-revelatory 'On Coming to a Bad End'. The 'Herald' did not change this title and, from this point on, tended in the main to allow Clift's titles to stand, even those beginning with 'On'.

The titles were sometimes modified however, lengthened from 'On Then and Now' to 'On Then and Now and

John Donne' or shortened from 'On Little Noddy, Christopher Robin, Gargantua, Don Quixote, And all that lot' to 'On Little Noddy and Christopher Robin'. The 'Herald' finally accepted the fact that they had an essayist writing for them and did her the courtesy of mostly using her titles in publication.*

*Nadia Wheatley's 'Chronological Listing of Essays by Charmian Clift in Sydney Morning Herald and Pol' has been invaluable in the above research.

NOTES

1. Letter from John Douglas Pringle to GT, 1989.
2. Interview, Margaret Vaile with GT, September, 1989.
3. cf. Everette E. Dennis, ed., The New Journalism: How it came to be, (Eugene: University of Oregon School of Journalism, 1971) Quoted, Thomas H. Ohlgren and Lynn M. Berk, The New Languages, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc. 1977).
4. Tom Wolfe, The New Journalism, (London: Picador, 1990 [first published, 1973]) Preface, p.1.
5. p.9.
6. Gore Vidal, Myra Breckinridge, (London: Panther, 1969) p.8.
7. The Australian Author, Volume 1. Number 2, Autumn, April 1969, p.3.
8. WOCC, p.12.
9. cf. Deirdre Coleman, Olga Masters Reporting Home, (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1990) Introduction.
10. Patrick White, 'The Prodigal Son', The Writer in the Modern World, 20th Century Prose, selected by H.P. Heseltine and S.Tick, (Melbourne: F.W. Cheshire, 1962) pp.116-7.
11. I in A, p.12.
12. Australian Book Review, no.112.
13. Radio Helicon, tape 4.
14. Interview with Bruce Elder by GT, March, 1990.

II. THE PRIZE

"I was the journalist who supplied the substance, she was the artist who supplied the burnish."[1]

In October, 1945 the Sydney Daily Telegraph announced a Novel Competition with prize money of one thousand pounds and a distinguished group of judges, including A.J.A. Waldock, Professor of English Literature at Sydney University, Vance Palmer, and Katharine Susannah Pritchard.[2] Pritchard's inclusion in the panel of judges was particularly apt. She herself had won the 1915 Hodder and Stoughton £1000 prize 'for best work about Australia' with her first novel, The Pioneers, and she held a pre-eminent position in Australian literature.

The Telegraph held great hopes for their novel competition and these were outlined in the Saturday Telegraph of 20th October, 1945, two days after the announcement of the names of the judges. An article, with the byline 'by Miss Bronte' (sic), was printed beneath photos of Louis Stone, Kylie Tennant, Katherine S. Pritchard, Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw. These were all authors who had won literary competitions in the past and their photos were displayed in order to give a cachet of respectability to the current literary

competition. The article contains an interesting summary of the effects of the war on literature and a defence of the value of literary contests.

> I expect that the war, with its dynamic emotional effect, and the impact of the uneasy early years of peace, will make some changes in Australian literature.
>
> I expect to see signs, almost immediately, of a widening of literary horizons, of a new impetus to creative effort, and of realisation of the richness of material hitherto ignored.
>
> We should find them in some, at least, of the manuscripts which will be entered for the Daily Telegraph £1000 novel contest.
>
> Literary competitions have already done a great deal for Australian writing. They have brought into notice authors who otherwise might have plugged along for years, as Louis Stone did, unknown to more than an esoteric few of their own people.
>
> It was a competition which brought to light Barnard Eldershaw's "A House is Built"...
>
> It was another literary competition that brought Kylie Tennant recognition and her first taste of worth-while remuneration for creative effort.

A collaborative book, Come in Spinner by Dymphna Cusack and Florence James, won first prize in the competition. Despite its high quality and immediate post-war relevance, The Telegraph did not publish it and indeed the book was unable to find a publisher until 1951 and only then in 'abridged' or censored form, as some aspects were deemed to be salacious in the restrictive climate of the times. In a foreword to the unexpurgated 1988 edition, Florence James discusses the collaboration which brought forth the book.

> When Dymphna and I set up temporary housekeeping in the Blue Mountains outside Sydney during the last year of the war, we had not thought of collaborating on a novel...
>
> Our collaboration was simple: we would each choose

> a story, write it up, then edit the other's work. In no time at all Four Winds and a Family was finished and had found a publisher. This was our Come in Spinner gestation period when Dymphna and I were gathering together the threads of our lives, our first real opportunity since the days of our friendship as undergraduates at Sydney University.[3]

Cusack had already had a successful collaboration with Miles Franklin, producing Pioneers on Parade which was published in 1939. This is referred to in the foreword above, describing Franklin and Cusack 'airing wittily their indignation at the social pretensions of the sesquicentenary celebrations'.[3]

The 'Herald's' literary competition would also bring to light a novel that was the result of a collaboration. Clift and Johnston worked on their joint novel High Valley for a year and submitted it to the Sydney Morning Herald Literary Competition. The Herald's answer to the Telegraph was not just a novel competition but a whole literary competition with prizes in various categories and minor prizes, and was a significant addition to the Australian literary calendar. The category for the novel remained the most important and, with a first prize of two thousand pounds, was clearly intended to eclipse its rival.

This was all taking place shortly after the war which had brought with it years of austerity in so many fields, particularly publishing. Few books had been published, those that were had to be justified in terms of 'the war effort' and were printed on thin, cheap paper with

'austerity' binding. For example, even the popular author Ion Idriess' patriotic book Onward Australia: Developing a Continent, published in 1944, appeared on thin flimsy brown paper with crumbling cardboard covers, unbound, and carried the following explanation:

> My publishers would have very much liked to illustrate this book with explanatory maps and photographs. Unfortunately, paper shortage makes it impossible. The book is fortunate to see print at all; as a matter of fact it has been written some time. It is because of the urgent shortage of paper that unfortunately I have not been able to include a number of other suggestions forwarded me.

The 'Herald' also attempted to assure the success and status of its competition by appointing highly qualified and esteemed judges. The money prizes were generous by any standards and represented an opportunity for serious writers to gain what amounted to the equivalent of several years on a good wage. The first prize in the novel section in 1947 was awarded to Ruth Park whose novel, A Harp in the South, had been chosen from 175 entries. Serialised in the 'Herald', Park's novel attracted wide acclaim, ensuring that the next year's award was eagerly awaited by literary figures and by the general public.

260 entries were received for the novel section in 1948, the year of High Valley. Even so, no award was made for second prize, despite the high number of entries. The judges summed up the quality of the entries as follows:

> This, the second novel competition, has brought forward one work of distinguished quality, but, taken in a lump, the standard of the best half-dozen entries was lower and the standard of the entries

> altogether no higher than in the first.
>
> Of the 260 entries, about thirty managed to qualify for further consideration. Eight novels survived this further scrutiny, and became candidates for prizes. One novel stood out at all stages from the first reading as fully deserving the first prize. In the final consideration three of them satisfied the requirements of a third prize.
>
> The judges are satisfied that the sponsors of a competition in which "High Valley" wins first prize need not fear for the standard of the competition or its value in stimulating literary work of high quality.[4]

The year after, 1949, no first prize was awarded. The 'Herald' referred to their competition as 'Australia's greatest literary competition' and the judges were obviously determined to maintain a high standard.

High Valley's victory in 1948 was announced on the front page of the 'Herald' on Saturday, May 8. The interview with the authors on that page, under the heading 'Husband and wife win £2,000', gives some insight into the writing of the joint novel. Johnston is generous in praising Clift's contribution and his quotation, which was later used on the dust-jacket and with which I have begun this chapter, appears in context.

> "'High Valley,'" the authors said, when interviewed this week, "was written under extreme difficulties. Because of the housing shortage we lived 75 miles apart for much of the time and met only at weekends. A son was born during the writing of the novel, and that slowed its progress. We wrote it in sections in under a year, and continually revised as we went along. The end of the novel was one of the first parts written."
>
> "If there is quality in this book it is the work of my wife," said Mr. Johnston. "She is responsible for characterisation and emotional content. I was the journalist who supplied the substance; she was the artist who supplied the burnish."

The judges for the 1948 competition were the same as for the first competition: Dr. A.G. Mitchell, Professor of Early English Literature and Language at Sydney University, Mr. T. Inglis Moore, author and lecturer in Pacific Studies at Canberra University College, and Mr. Leon Gellert, poet and literary editor and columnist of the 'Herald'. The judges made their report on High Valley as follows:

> "HIGH VALLEY" is on more than one account a distinguished piece of work. It derives no advantage from its remote setting in Tibet and the interests of the beliefs and customs of the valley community.(sic.) On the contrary, the difficulty of translating this material into Western terms while preserving its character might have proved insurmountable. In particular, the dialogue is dignified and does not degenerate into the conventional Chinese-English of popular fiction.
>
> Keen observation and a ready and vivid power of description, a patient uncovering of motive and searching of character are everywhere apparent. But the reader feels in addition the working of a higher imagination, which does not merely present, but recreates, the life and character of persons, the community and inanimate nature. The story is skilfully and economically constructed, the action mounting through scenes of increasing dramatic intensity to the final decision to leave the High Valley.
>
> The characters are simply but firmly built up, and the clash of character and conflict of loyalty and desire are skilfully handled. The writing has a real distinction, a sureness and delicacy of touch unequalled so far in the two competitions for novels. The descriptive passages at times reach a remarkably high level.[4]

Gellert wrote a widely-read literary column for the 'Herald' and, on the occasion of the announcement of the literary awards, the judges' comments took up most of the space usually occupied by his weekly column. It was only

after the judging that he and the other judges realised they had chosen as winner a 'joint novel'. Gellert devoted the rest of his column, 'Something Personal', to a discussion of the judging and of the collaboration of Clift and Johnston in particular and husband-wife writing teams in general.

> BUT a judge's task is not all heavy going. Sometimes he chances upon a banquet that sets his gastric juices flowing in a jubilant stream [Gellert is continuing an extended metaphor] and his blood dancing upon its way in little exultant leaps. Such a repast was "High Valley", the winning novel, in which he was continually regaled with such exquisite refections as this:- [there follows a descriptive passage from High Valley]...
>
> When I learn that so fine a novel as "High Valley" is the outcome of the collaboration between a husband and wife I find myself wandering uneasily along the highways of conjecture. Here are two people, each of whom is a complement of the other, and they have succeeded in achieving a workable harmony of creativeness.
>
> What can happen to this union? What dangers have the partners to guard against? (ibid.)

Gellert followed his warning with a perhaps apocryphal tale of a husband and wife writing team parting with acrimony. Johnston and Clift were to write three more joint novels and stay together, albeit with many and deep problems, until Clift's death in 1969.[5]

Literary collaboration is an interesting field which risks attracting speculation of the 'detective' kind, turning interest away from the text. Maryanne Dever avoids such speculation in her scholarly study of joint authorship,[6] and she refers to S. Schoenbaum to emphasise

> the enormous variation that can exist within a collaborative scenario, in particular those where

> writers "prefer to work in intimate association, going over one another's drafts, revising, deleting, and interpolating... (mindful of) the possibility of the final product, however it was achieved, being revised by one of the original authors".[7]

Dealing specifically with Barnard and Eldershaw, Dever explains that they

> used to pass draft sections back and forth to one another and that they would work together on a manuscript when circumstances permitted.[8]

Dever warns that the 'evidence' in no way makes it possible to reconstruct 'the precise conditions of composition', pointing out that 'Barnard, for example, likened collaboration to "a bedroom secret"'. It was further noted that Eldershaw, in one of her final lectures on the collaboration 'did not relate...how much each author contributed to their work: this she would not disclose even had it been possible'.[9] Dever also notes the change of attitude to literary works by critics once they have discovered that a particular work is the result of a collaboration. As she says:

> This is particularly ironic if it is considered that collaboration, no less than pseudonymity, represents a self-conscious attempt to construct a literary subject, underscoring the notion that "an author is made not born".[10]

Johnston and Clift certainly 'worked in intimate association'; but Johnston was later to claim that their final collaboration, The Sponge Divers, was his book. Nevertheless, their collaboration was of absolute importance to the couple at this and later stages of their

careers.

In her afterword to the 1990 'Imprint' edition and in an article in 'Australian Society',[11] Nadia Wheatley discusses 'The Mechanics of Collaboration' with regard to High Valley in particular. She gives a clear picture of the special collaboration of Johnston and Clift, describing the background to Johnston's time in Tibet and discussing the need for both Johnston and Clift to write after casting their lot together and moving to Sydney.

> Not surprisingly, given the subject matter, it was at Johnston's suggestion that the couple began to work on the book. Describing the collaborative process, twenty years later, they noted that they 'wrote a careful synopsis, wrote a chapter each, and then exchanged ideas and rewrote each other's work if necessary'. At the time of the prize they declared that they 'wrote it in sections in under a year and continually revised as [they] went along'.[11]

The two writers lived apart for much of the collaboration; Clift was pregnant and in Kiama, while Johnston worked as a journalist in Sydney. Wheatley concludes that the 'extreme difficulties' the writers referred to were actually an advantage to Clift's writing. Clift had been described by Johnston as 'a slow, painstaking careful writer'. Johnston's facility, even 'slickness' with writing was well-known. Margaret Backhouse, Clift's sister, described the couple working on High Valley at Kiama at weekends.

> 'George and Charmian would be sitting at the old deal table... each with a typewriter, going for their lives. George would be typing away, typing away, typing away, almost singing as he's going, typing away, give it a little thought, puffing cigarettes,

> typing away, typing away. Charmian would do a little bit, think, tear it up, chuck it in the wastepaper basket, get up and walk around, stalk around and so on, but when she put it down, it was right. And eventually she'd pass over what she'd written to George. He'd read it, he'd pass over what he'd written -- he'd have this much for her to read, but she'd have a little bit like that for him to read, you see. And then they'd put their heads together and say, "Now what are we going to keep and what are we going to cut?"... And there might be a stony silence for a while or something, or one of them might say something rude, but they'd come together. And it would be, "All right, we'll do it this way!"' (ibid)

What did Johnston mean by "she was the artist who supplied the burnish"? To burnish is to make bright and glossy, to polish, and the burnish is anything laid over a surface to burnish it.[12] Johnston made no secret of the fact that he regarded Clift as the better writer. Of the writing of High Valley, he said that it was a 'fair fifty-fifty...she is the better writer, I the better journalist'.[13] By saying that she provided the burnish, then, he implied that the basis of the book was his and the artistic finishing was Clift's.

Johnston knew Tibet. He had travelled there as a war correspondent and his experiences, which are often drawn upon in his books, were to have a profound effect on him for the rest of his life. The customs, settings, characters and religious background then, would all have come from Johnston the journalist, though the characterisation and detailed description may have been from Clift. For example, the interview by the main character, Salom with the Tulku, the 'Living Buddha' is

apparently based on a similar interview afforded to Johnston by just such a person.[14]

Clift had not been to Tibet. The actual Tibetan aspects of the story were perforce supplied by Johnston. He had already described 'The Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix' in Journey Through Tomorrow, in a passage quoted by Kinnane:

> Here was a valley of breathtaking colour and beauty... a valley of a million flowers glittering in bright warm sunshine...[15]

This is the valley which is evoked in High Valley in passages such as the following which indicate why judges and reviewers praised so highly the power and quality of description.

> Each day was a gem of ever-brightening lustre. He was enchanted by the beauty of the high pastures: it was loveliness of a quality he had never known before, because its beauty had the frailty of something one knows to be transient. It was the quality of a flower plucked at the supremacy of its blooming. It was a beauty already steeped in its own decay and so made the more beautiful for its promise of ill-fate. There were times when Salom, clutching the loveliness to him as a jealous man clutches his mistress, would look back toward the solitary peaks, and then his eyes would cloud with dread. But the peaks would be white and quiet beneath a serene sky, and the valley would fold back in swathes of colour tremulous in the heat. The peaks were still unveiled and no blizzard smudged the sky -- and winter was far away.[16]

Here already is the rhetorical patterning which would appear definitively in Clift's later essays. The repetition of key phrases, the building of a ladder with the repetition of 'it was' at the beginning of the

passage, and 'the peaks' towards the end and the use of colour-related words to present the picture. However, such description does not require first-hand knowledge. The allusive language, the 'gem of ever-brightening lustre', 'the quality of a flower plucked at the supremacy of its blooming', such literary devices do not require that the writer should actually have visited the place described. The language is appropriate to the setting chosen by the writers, but it is hardly geographically specific. Nature is used to mirror the mood of the character Salom and presage the outcome of the story. There is a hint of the dark days to come in '...no blizzard smudged the sky - and winter was far away.' The very landscape is personified with the 'beauty already steeped in its own decay and so made the more beautiful for its promise of ill-fate'. Though Johnston may well have contributed the simile 'as a jealous man clutches his mistress', Clift could have written much of this without visiting Tibet.

The descriptive powers, which I am suggesting begin to emerge in Clift's contribution to this work, were to become a distinctive feature of her style, culminating in her essays and her writing for the electronic media. The continual comment from readers is that 'she brought things alive for me'; that they were able to see just what she described'.

Both Max Brown, Australian writer, journalist,

associate of the Johnstons, and long-time resident of Kiama, and also Nadia Wheatley feel that Clift could have drawn on the scenery around Kiama for much of her description in High Valley.[17] Looming over Kiama, and visible without interruption from the Clift house near Bombo Beach, are Saddleback Mountain and the plateau of Barren Grounds. Nestling beneath the mountain and the plateau are the cattle grazing farms. As Wheatley puts it:

> Although this valley ends abruptly at Bombo Beach and the Pacific Ocean, it folds back in a westerly direction into a succession of valleys that abut onto the sheer rise of the Illawarra escarpment. Thus, while the Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix is a composite of S-le-t'o and other valleys described in Journey Through Tomorrow, the novelists also drew upon the miniature geographical model that lay at their doorstep.[11]

As a child, Clift had clambered all over this region, including The Barren Grounds which are now a natural reserve and bird sanctuary. To walk this extensive, bleak, rather treeless and strangely beautiful plateau is to be constantly reminded of passages from High Valley. There are outcrops of rock, clumps of dead trees, heath-like areas and vegetation that recall the 'contorted grove' and the 'wasteland' where Salom comes upon Yanong, performing the Rolang, and although there is no snow on the Barren Grounds, the rest could well have been inspired by Clift's childhood environment.

There is evidence in one of Clift's Herald essays that Veshti, the main female character of High Valley, is based

on a real person. In 'On a Cluttered Mantelpiece' she refers to a Tibetan bowl of Johnston's that 'belonged to a Tibetan girl called Veshti, about whom we wrote a novel once.'[18] Coming some seventeen years after the writing of the book, the reference has an understandably wistful tone. Since nothing in Johnston's previously published works points to such engagement, one can surmise that the romantic story, culminating as it does in the dramatic deaths of the lovers in each other's arms beneath the snow, was supplied by Clift.

There can be little doubt that winning the 'Herald' prize was the main catalyst for Johnston and Clift becoming full-time writers. In their own eyes and in the eyes of their contemporaries they were now successful novelists. As Kinnane says, the praise of the judges and of the reviewers made them 'the literary toasts of Sydney'.[19] As Clift puts it much later : "I never knew a writer was something one could be. "[20]

Not everyone was pleased, however; Ruth Park gave her version of the win much later.

> It was the late 1940's. The Johnstons had caused flutters in literary circles not only because they had won the Sydney Morning Herald's novel competition with the unlikely (my underlining) High Valley, but because they'd let the side down. Despite the Herald's justified and exacting requests for secrecy, they had run around blabbing their heads off. How mortifying for the Herald was the consequence! A rival newspaper first published the results of their expensive competition, and all the Herald was left with was anti-climax. The chagrin! The fury! The threats never to hold another competition! The Johnstons were amazed at the recriminations. It was

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> the first time I realised that they shared a folie a deux with probably disastrous consequences - they had no foresight.[21]

Park sums up the feeling of elation that Clift experienced after winning the prize for High Valley.

> "We've got the world by the scruff," she exclaimed. But of course we didn't.(ibid.)

Apparently, as Park points out, the 'Herald' was furious that Johnston and Clift had not remained quiet about their win until it was published in the 'Herald' but had told friends and had begun celebrating. Perhaps coincidentally, the judges were changed for the next year, even though they had remained the same from the year before. Nor was High Valley serialised in the 'Herald' as Park's Harp in the South had been, despite the judges' comment that High Valley had 'a real distinction, a sureness and delicacy of touch unequalled so far in the two competitions for novels'.

Although there was a deal of publicity for the Park novel in the 'Herald' in the week of the High Valley announcement, there is no hint of 'the fury, the chagrin and the threats' in the treatment of High Valley by the 'Herald' at the time of the announcement of the award. The novel is referred to on the front page as the 'one distinguished book', and the judges' report is full of praise. The same issue of the 'Herald' carried a full review of the novel praising it warmly and attempting to deal with the 'joint-writing' aspect of the novel. It was

also prepared to predict the literary future of the team.

> "HIGH VALLEY" is no impossible "Lost Horizon" and the setting is no sugary Shangri-La. The story might easily have become a James Hilton - or a Rider Haggard - romance, but the authors restrain its plunging and draw it along a path dictated by acute artistic conscience. Though the story rises to fineness and surges to strength, sincerity forced the sacrifice of the sensational.
>
> The novel is a human allegory seen through mystic remoteness. It is a love story told with delicacy and its tragedy carries conviction in simplicity. It curves quietly to a destiny ordained in the birth of its characters.
>
> George Johnston credits his wife with the literary quality and emotional content of the novel. It could be so. Johnston's previous books, highly readable though they were, displayed at most a facile application to meet a market. Though they ably served their purpose, they were hastily assembled, and if he had an eye for material he showed no hand for literature.
>
> But no matter to whom the credit belongs, there is great power in "High Valley" and descriptive passages ascend to genuine distinction. The Johnstons are a team which, if they continue co-ordinating substance and talent, can look to a secure literary future.[4]

Here was the encouragement to write and to write seriously, but the 'secure literary future' was to prove elusive and to be very long in coming. This was the genesis of the path that would lead Johnston, on the one hand, to the My Brother Jack trilogy and Clift, on the other, back to the pages of the 'Herald' as the successful weekly essay writer.

NOTES: 'THE PRIZE'

1. GJ, SMH, May 8, 1948.
2. Daily Telegraph, Sydney, October 18, 1945, p. 1.
3. Dymphna Cusack and Florence James, Come in Spinner,(A & R, Sydney, 1988) pp.vi-vii.
4. SMH, May 8, 1948, p.6.
5. Gellert remained as a judge for the novels in the next year's competition although the other two judges were replaced by Professor A.J.A. Waldoch, Professor of English Literature at the University of Sydney, and Mr. H.M. Green, former librarian of the University of Sydney. These two gentlemen had previously been judges for the Daily Telegraph novel competition.
6. Maryanne Dever, ASAL paper, 'Author! Author! M. Barnard Eldershaw and the question of Literary Collaboration', and letter to GT, August, 1991.
7. S. Schoenbaum, Internal Evidence and Elizabethan Dramatic Authorship (London: Edward Arnold, 1966), p.226. quoted by M. Dever.
8. Marjorie Barnard, "The Gentle Art of Collaboration", Ink No. 2 (Sydney: FAW, 1977), p.126. quoted by M. Dever.
9. Aileen Palmer's Obituary Notice for Flora Eldershaw, Aileen Palmer Papers NLA MSS 6759/24, quoted by M. Dever.
10. Andrew Bouris, "Subject to Authority", Random Issue, 2 (1980), 57, quoted by M. Dever, ASAL paper, p.8.
11. Nadia Wheatley, 'The Mechanics of Collaboration', 'Australian Society', December, 1989/January 1990, pp.38-9.
12. Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.
13. Kinnane, p.100. quoting from Biographical questionnaire, Bobbs-Merrill MSS, Lilly Library, University of Indiana, USA.
14. cf. Kinnane, p.61, referring to Johnston's Journey Through Tomorrow where Johnston gives details of his meeting with the leader of the white sect of lamas.
15. Kinnane, pp. 223-4.
16. HV, p. 56.
17. Interview with GT, March, 1988.
18. SMH, 20th May, 1985. I in A, p.103.
19. Kinnane, p.100.
20. Hazel de Berg tape.
21. Ruth Park's review of WOCC, 'The Independent Monthly', September, 1989.

III. THE JOINT NOVELS

> In the beginning the valley probably had many names, varying with the seasons, with generations, with the moods and whims of headmen. Finally, with the occasional poetry of inarticulate men, it had come to be called the Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix.[1]

The Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix provides the setting for Clift and Johnston's prize-winning joint novel High Valley which judges praised for its descriptive passages. The description is not merely something added for 'local colour', it parallels the action and is an integral part of the novel, weaving story and setting together. The most powerful force in the novel is nature, beautiful and cruel and personified as 'the valley'. Muhlam, the headman of the community of the Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix warns Salom, the story's protagonist: 'Do not fight against the valley...for always the valley wins'. Salom, the man with no real country or people to call his own, has made the difficult trek to the Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix in a quest for happiness.

This is a 'quest' novel, where a pure and simple character, without family or community ties, is sent by an old man to search for his own Holy Grail, in this case,

contentment and happiness. The allegorical nature of the quest is clearly set out, Salom is 'everyman', the human spirit, humanity. The parallel with the traditional story of quest even extends to the fact that Salom is on horseback, like a knight of old, for his long and arduous trek. He is a character searching for his roots and for a meaning to life. Ridiculed by those he meets, an orphan with some sort of memory of being with the Communist Army when it retreated into Tibet fifteen years before, Salom is confused and unhappy, rejected by those he thought were his people. An old pedlar, seeking company, befriends him, speaks kindly and wisely and inspires him to set off on his quest, telling him he will find what he is seeking in the Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix.

The young man has taken what has happened to him and his life experience to date as something of specific significance to be dealt with. The pedlar, the old man, representing wisdom, is helping the young man to see further than the specific, to realise that events have a general significance. 'The importance is the word', he says, and that word 'undefeated', becomes the theme of the novel. The pedlar tells Salom of the valley and speaking about the army and life, he presents the exposition of the theme:

> ... it was an army of men made unconquerable by the very fact that it could not live with the thought of defeat... And, whatever their failings, men who are unconquerable are worthy men. When a man dies he should seek but a single word to be brushed on the

> tablet above his grave. Undefeated. That is the word, boy. Undefeated. This army to which your father belonged was an army of stalwart men who were undefeated. The killing, the rape, the plunder -- all these things... are not important. The importance is the word, my son. The simple word.[2]

The youth is inspired to make the difficult four-months-long trek with the promise of happiness as he has been given a goal, to strive through hardship for happiness. "Why, even its name is poetry, my son," says the pedlar,"It is called the Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix."[3]

The youth's hesitation is overcome by the clever persuasion of the old pedlar,

> "Not an old man's dream, boy. The dream of a young man now grown old. There is a difference."[4]

If the boy needed further encouragement, it comes in the form of the continued ridicule of the other people. The valley is an escape.

The Camusian theme of escape which was to become so important in much of Clift's later work is here presented definitively in High Valley. The 'George Johnston Papers' (MS 5027) in the National Library contain evidence of the Johnstons' interest in Albert Camus. The papers have quotations from Camus by Conor Cruise O'Brien and from The Myth of Sisyphus, dealing particularly with suicide and death. L'Etranger, with its international popularity in the immediate post-war years may well have influenced their writing. L'Etranger has the theme of 'Il n'y a pas

d'issue', 'there is no escape', and Camus' hero Meursault finds understanding and triumph in death. On the eve of his execution, after his bitter quarrel with the prison priest, he finds peace and understands why, at the end of her life, his mother had taken a 'fiance',

> why she had played at beginning again... So close to death, my mother must have felt herself liberated and ready to live everything over again.[5]

Then in a similar vein to the words of the Tulku, Meursault says of his mother's death: 'Nobody, nobody had the right to cry over her.'(ibid) Speaking of himself and his imminent death he says: 'I opened myself for the first time to the tender indifference of the world... I felt that I had been happy and that I still was happy.' These elements of death and happiness are repeated in High Valley, they contribute to its artistic integrity and create the ending of the novel. After fighting with the evil priest Yanong, Salom will feel cleansed and he and Veshti will be forced to the conclusion that there is no way out but, like Meursault, will have their own triumph in death, a triumph realised and made tangible by the Tulku, 'the Living Buddha'.

This Camusian theme of there being no escape reappears in Clift's major individual novel Honour's Mimic. Kathy, the protagonist, will find no solution within society for her problem. She will be stoned in the street as an adulteress.

In Clift's novel set in Kiama, Walk to the Paradise Gardens, the social and racial problems will only be soluble by a death and by having the characters quit the society or social milieu of the novel. The similarities to High Valley are evident.

Nadia Wheatley puts forward strong evidence that it was Clift, the '23-year-old fledgeling novelist', who determined style, characterisation, and theme in High Valley. Wheatley quotes from Clift's sister Margaret who relates how Clift encouraged Johnston, the 'great story-teller' and 'enthusiastic talker'.

> 'She was encouraging him to talk about it, and she was taking his descriptions of people and places and all the rest of it, but the people in particular, and moulding them into a character.'[6]

Wheatley feels that Clift drew in particular on the inhabitants of the small North Kiama settlement and the nearby dairy farmers 'whose land the young Charmian and her brother used to roam' for the models of the community in High Valley and 'Thus in "moulding" her Tibetans she was able to use local clay'. (ibid)

Clift's own family can be seen also in the portraits of the main characters. Muhlam the headman and Kelinka his wife bear striking resemblances to Clift's own parents, while aspects of Clift herself are to be found in the characters of both Veshti, the daughter, and 'the exuberant and sexually attractive Bitola'. She also sees something of the young David Meredith in Salom, together

with aspects of Clift's brother Barre:

> ...the rest of the neighbours are a cross-section of people whom one could find in any microcosm of humanity.(ibid)

Clift worked best with characters and places she knew and understood well. There is nothing particularly Chinese or Tibetan about the characters of High Valley and nothing very complex about them. As a 'microcosm of humanity' they are accessible to Western readers and in line with the allegorical nature of the novel and its generalisations.

Most people in life and most characters in books are a mixture of both good and evil, but in allegory one can have the completely good and the completely evil. The monk Yanòng, rapacious and greedy, feeding off his people with an intensity of lust, is presented as entirely evil while the protagonist, Salom, represents good. Yanong's background is carefully presented so that he comes to represent one face of religion. He is so wicked and so inhuman that his death at the hands of Salom, so good and so human, is an unambiguous triumph of good over evil. Religion however has another side, represented in this story by the Tulku, 'the Living Buddha'. There is no place for killing in the valley as there has never before been any killing there. Salom must flee, but Veshti, in complete understanding of what she is doing, goes with him. The understanding and the ultimate act of love come from the woman.

"We are speaking the truth to each other, Salom.

> We know we will not reach the watch-tower. And I know I have no wish to go back. For me, Salom, there can be no returning, for if I returned there would never be a setting-out again. This I know, Salom, and this is the truth." She stroked his arm gently. "And this I think you know, too."[7]

Salom has found wisdom. The Tulku, or Living Buddha, had told him that the end of the story would be the best ending and the only ending.

> For the maid, for the headman, for the monk -- and for you. Life, boy, has a way of meting out rewards and punishments."[8]

The Tulku had also asked him:

> "What of the word, boy, that your father left you?-- that the pedlar told you? Undefeated."

The maid, Veshti, asks Salom to make love to her as they realise they are both to die.

> "I would wish to become your wife."

With melodramatic description, reminiscent of the works of Rider Haggard, the young couple make love as the whole of nature symbolically responds to their dying act.

> With her naked body burning under his, the long, white waves curled upward into a shouting, tumultuous column, and the old majestic gods leant out from the Ta Hsueh Shan and gathered the columns to themselves, and ended another summer in the Valley of the Dreaming Phoenix as they flung themselves forward and inward, and the columns burst with a wild and triumphant roar into a million seething balls of snow, curving inward, hissing inward, growing larger and larger.
>
> The blizzard wailed its fury over the Pass of White Watching and the drifts mounted with a secret silence until even the trees were drowned beneath the slow white flood.[9]

It just remains for the brief epilogue to complete the denouement with the passionate statement of the Tulku

on uncovering the bodies at the end of winter.

> And then the Living Buddha flung wide his arms, and tears flooded his eyes, and yet in his thunderous face was a titanic contempt and an overwhelming pity for the blindness of humanity.
>
> "Look again, fool!" he muttered. "They were the undefeated!"[10]

The novel was summed up in the 'Herald' review on the day of the announcement of the prize in the following terms:

> The novel is essentially a fantasy wearing an air of convincing mysticism. While the authors hold the reins of plausible logic and artistic restraint hard on dramatic intensity, the story presses further and further against its quiet destiny. There are none of the flaws of collaboration and the dignity of its discourse never falters.

Following the success of High Valley in Australia, Bobbs-Merrill decided to publish the novel in the United States, with a high-profile campaign and book-launch.[11] In a letter to Bobbs-Merrill in response to their request for a biographical sketch to use in the publicity, the confident authors were already preparing the ground for the follow-up book: 'At the moment,' they explained, 'we are collaborating on a second and more ambitious novel, "The Piping Cry", which I hope you will have the opportunity of seeing'.[12]

The Piping Cry was never published and the manuscript disappeared shortly after it was written and submitted to Bobbs-Merril and to other publishers. Kinnane's knowledge

of the text comes from three publisher's readers' reports made to Bobbs-Merrill. The novel was 'a serious attempt to write about Australian philistinism in the late 1940s'. Kinnane reconstructs a synopsis of the story and reproduces the readers' comments, praising

> the style of the writing and its power to evoke Sydney Bohemian life. 'No other book or manuscript that I have encountered has brought out for me the life and appearance of a big Australian city as this one does'...(ibid)

But the readers found the story 'trite and uninteresting'. It is unfortunate, as Kinnane says, that Australian readers did not get the opportunity to read The Piping Cry, because of its special local relevance and the point that Johnston and Clift were obviously trying to make 'about the relation of artists to Australian society at the time'. Kinnane continues his analysis, finding 'fascinating similarities with My Brother Jack'. The Johnstons may have been expressing their own particular artistic crisis in the book which apparently deals at length with the problem of whether to become a serious or commercial writer. The Bobbs-Merrill questionnaire also contains the interesting information that the Johnstons were planning to 'leave for London at the end of this year and should be there for three years or so'.[13]

The Johnstons did indeed go to London but remained away from Australia until 1964, fourteen years later. When the Johnstons left for London in mid-February, 1951, they

were still working on The Piping Cry. The novel about Australia had proved more difficult than they had anticipated.

In London, despite an apparently hectic social life, they undertook a re-write of The Piping Cry for which they retained high hopes. Johnston wrote to George Ferguson of Angus and Robertson, warning him that 'this time we shall be delivering to you a real Australian novel, which might cause quite a stir out there'.[14] No more was heard of the novel or the manuscript until Garry Kinnane carried out his research for his biography of Johnston. Ruth Park referred to it in 1989 as if it were purely Johnston's work, without any reference to its being a collaboration.

> I don't remember George's herding the guests into a corner while he read them the latest pages of his new book The Piping Cry, but he did tell us a good deal about it.
> "George talks a great book," observed Colin Simpson, the travel writer. But it was never published, as so many talked-out books are not.[15]

The Australian theme was not to reappear in the Johnstons' work for many years. Johnston came back to it, and apparently used material from The Piping Cry, in My Brother Jack, while Clift wrestled for a long time with her novel about her hometown, Kiama, Walk to the Paradise Gardens.[16]

The Johnstons devoted their creative energies in 1952 to their new Joint Novel, The Big Chariot. Although High Valley had been relatively successful in America, it had

not realised the hopes of the authors or the publishers. Bobbs-Merrill nevertheless retained faith in the Johnstons and agreed to a generous American promotion campaign. The London weather, the rationing, the four years since the success of High Valley, the social whirl, all meant that they needed a breakthrough if they were to achieve their ambitions as serious writers.[17]

Johnston and Clift intended their novel about old China, The Big Chariot, to have general significance and pertinence to the modern world.

> "Never help the big chariot:
> You push -- your reward is the dust;
> Never think of the world's sorrows;
> Your reward will be wretchedness."[18]

In High Valley the general significance was implicit in the subject matter and treatment of the story. In The Big Chariot Johnston and Clift clearly stated their aim in the foreword to their book.

> AS A GENERAL RULE the history books of the Western world are content to disregard all but the most spectacular aspects of Oriental history. This is unfortunate partly in that it contributes to our misunderstanding of the Asiatic mentality, and partly because it robs us of a great many moving and splendid stories in which we might find that Asiatic events, stripped of their stylized strangeness, are moved by human pressures remarkably similar to those forces which stir us all -- love, virtue, greed, ambition, fear, loyalty, treachery, hatred.
>
> Strip the Dragon Robe from Ancient China, and it stands before us most assuredly as a man, recognizably the same as we are, moved by the same impulses, treading the same pathway.
>
> The world today still stirs to the ripples of those far-off events.[19]

A reader today may find condescension in such expressions as 'our misunderstanding of the Asiatic mentality' but viewed in the context of a foreword written in the early 1950's, it is remarkably free of the restrictive prejudices of the day. The book, and the comments in the foreword, are ahead of their time in suggesting that western readers generally and probably Australian readers in particular would do well to look to Asia for enlightenment and understanding. Johnston had tried to present the Asian world in journalistic form during his time and travels as a war correspondent. He and Clift present this world again in a complicated, researched and ambitious historical novel. Although the novel is much more intricate and involved than High Valley, they are once more using an exotic and unfamiliar territory to allow them to write about universals.

The Big Chariot is a story of two brothers, Cheng Yuan and Cheng Wei. Their father, Cheng Li-jen, is an important courtier in the court of the Ming dynasty at the time of its collapse and replacement by the Manchu in 1644. The novel deals with the nineteen years from the 'official' date of the end of the Ming to its liquidation with the execution of the Ming Emperor in Yunnan-fu, in the remote west of China, in 1663. An intricate and delicate love story is interwoven with the story of the two brothers who are very different in temperament and

appearance and who side with the opposing dynasties of the Ming and the Manchu. It is the father who introduces the protagonists, his two sons, to the reader. The sons represent the characteristics of the two dynasties and, in what can be seen as a comment on the human condition, two opposing faces of mankind.

> "HOW STRANGE IT is that each time I see you both together you grow more apart from each other." He studied them carefully. "When you were ten there was no person in Pekin, not the Emperor himself, who could tell you apart. Now there is a resemblance, but you are no longer alike."
>
> The brothers looked at each other, smiling a little. It was the sturdier of the two who spoke for them.
>
> "We live different lives now," he said. "It is natural, sir, that we should shape ourselves differently."
>
> "Or be shaped differently," Chen Li-jen said gently and motioned them toward the couch.[20]

In Chinese philosophy there are two opposing principles of the universe, the Yin and the Yang. The Yin is the passive, female principle. The Yang is the active, male principle. These two principles are of particular importance in The Big Chariot. This is a joint novel written by a male/female team and the story deals with two brothers who represent the two opposing male/female characteristics. Wei is the sturdy, strong, more assertive of the brothers. It will be he who represents physical strength, political pragmatism, the 'might is right', the male or Yang. The father himself introduces and describes his son Wei in an apparent musing.

> His was the stronger, more assertive character. The strength and bulk of his figure had given him self-

> confidence; he was already a young man, forthright and probably brave. The next step, unless he were watched, was toward arrogance and perhaps brutality.(ibid.)

The other son, Yuan, who becomes the central focus of the action, the main protagonist of the novel, represents sensitivity, idealism, loyalty and gentility. He is the Yin. His father's description of him reveals his father's fears.

> Yuan, on the other hand, was shy and slim, with nervous mannerisms that frequently concealed the intelligence and sensitivity he seemed to possess. He had inherited the delicacy of his mother with no compensation of his father's strength. He had his mother's gentility, too--a trait good enough, indeed admirable, in a woman, but dangerous in a man.(ibid.)

The contrast of the two protagonists is highly structured, with appropriate indications of the role of nurture and heredity in their formation and development. As was the case in High Valley, the authors are presenting a struggle between good and evil but this time with somewhat more subtlety. The two roles of male and female are shown through the two brothers and their supporting of different causes and indeed their absolute opposing lifestyles. It is the 'yin' or female characteristic personnage who triumphs, though not melodramatically, in the end. It is Yuan, the 'yin' character, who shows the real strength to overcome adversity and to gain the moral victory over his brother's force of arms. Kinnane sees this contrast between the two brothers as

> an interesting precursor to My Brother Jack, which of course uses much the same pattern, with Jack Meredith

> and Wei linked as the brave ones, and David Meredith and Yuan as the clever ones. Yuan is even given David's profession as an apprenticed printer, and is closer to his mother than to his father.[21]

The Big Chariot carries the dedication,

For

MARY BUCK.[22]

The novel received good reviews, particularly in America where there was talk of making it into a film.[23] The Sydney Morning Herald fell short of the eulogistic phrases of the Americans ('Memorable', 'flawlessly written') but predicted a popular success for the novel. The 'Herald' stated mistakenly that the book was 'already having a best-seller run in the United States',[24] and then tried to account for this 'apparent' success.

> The reason becomes plain before one has gone half-way through the book: it has no message, and it may not please the more exigent critic, but it is a good story.

There followed a brief and accurate summary of the book and its theme, which hardly fitted with the previous statement that the book had 'no message'.

> THE theme of the novel is the never-ceasing struggle between a form of tyranny which may change its name from century to century, but never its character, and those enduring virtues and sometimes only dimly seen ideals which men may sometimes desert but to which they always return.

The reviewer then returned to the 'best-seller' idea, perhaps hoodwinked by over-enthusiastic 'public relations'.

> CHARMIAN CLIFT and George Johnston are natural storytellers, uninhibited by the taboos which

restrain some other more "literary" writers.

> They have an affinity with the story-tellers of the Eastern bazaars; like them, they cater for a mass appetite for tales of intrigue, terror, violence, bravery, love, sacrifice and final triumph. Their medium is action and they handle it with all the slashing efficiency of a sabre duellist.

One wonders at the motives of the 'Herald' reviewer in striving to categorise the Johnstons as 'non-literary' as it was his paper which had awarded them the major 'literary' prize for their first joint novel. To damn with faint praise High Valley and The Big Chariot as mere tales of intrigue, terror, violence... is to miss much of their subtlety and to ignore the qualities of these books which, with their narrative devices, descriptive power and careful construction are far removed from what could be expected of 'story-tellers of the Eastern bazaars'. Nevertheless, the Johnstons would have wished that the 'Herald' reviewer had been right in his assumption that they had created a best-seller. Though they hoped to be regarded as 'literary' writers, they needed the break-through of a good seller if not a 'best-seller' and their hopes for The Big Chariot were certainly not realised as it was a financial flop.

There is general agreement that The Sponge Divers, the next joint novel, was mainly Johnston's work, however, I feel that Clift's contribution may have been somewhat greater than is generally believed. Except for Johnston's

journalistic work, there appears to have been no published work in 1953 by Johnston or Clift and certainly no joint work was underway or even planned at this stage. The 'Kalymnos Scheme' was to provide the break and the new burst of enthusiasm for their literary hopes. Wilfred Thomas, who informed the Johnstons about the 'scheme', remembers Johnston saying:

> 'Do you know, I've been looking for a book to write that would get me out of Fleet Street, and this is the one!'[25]

There is no hint there of joint authorship, however the couple did go to Kalymnos giving the impression they were going to collaborate and, when The Sponge Divers was delivered to them, the publishers were under the impression they had received a joint novel. Bobbs-Merrill suggested that the title be changed to The Sea and the Stone for the American edition and an internal memorandum from one of the editors, Herman Ziegner, makes their belief that this was a joint novel quite clear.

> ...we have carried on with these authors in the hope of getting a book with the intense dramatic power of High Valley, written with all the skill and artistry Charmian Clift and George Johnston have at their command, and much closer in its people and setting to the experience and interest of American readers.[26]

In a letter to his daughter Gae, Johnston claimed that The Sponge Divers was really his book, 'the two names having been left there as an obligation of contract'.[27] Clift summed up the situation as simply no longer wishing to collaborate on novel-writing, being sick, she said,'of

being a literary hod-carrier',[28] while Wheatley suggests that only 'some descriptive passages' were contributed by Clift.

I feel that Clift made somewhat more of a contribution than the above might indicate. It is not surprising that Johnston would minimise Clift's contribution to the book when speaking about it at this later stage of his life. Throughout the My Brother Jack trilogy he avoided making the Clift figure of Cressida Morley a writer, yet her writing was the most important aspect of Clift's life, it meant virtually everything to her. She is drawn in recognisable detail but she never does any writing, not even for the 'genuine' collaboration of High Valley.

In the National Library in Canberra, in one of Clift's notebooks, I found the following entry:

> The Kalymnian:
> 1st person?
> Mina (the widow)
> Beginning Dec. setting. all ships back except Constantine. Good season - Nth African coast open - fishing Cyrenaica. Telfs over from Cos. "It's a bastard in the summer and a grave in winter - but I can look across at Turkey"[29]

This is a partial plan for The Sponge Divers, which was at first tentatively named The Kalymnian and carries the dedication:

For the

Kalymnians

The plan is obviously Clift's and the signature 'Charmian Johnston' appears on the back cover. In addition, the experienced reader at Bobbs-Merrill was quite certain that he detected Clift's touch in the writing. The Authors' Note to the Sponge Divers, signed by both authors and dated Kalymnos, 1955, would presumably have been written after the text had been completed and it gives no indication of the book being entirely Johnston's work.

It is clear that Clift's contribution to the partnership was far less than for the previous two joint works. The demands of coping with a family on the primitive island and the domestic chores fell mostly to Clift and probably as a result of this, her involvement with the island and its people seems to have found its outlet in her personal experience book Mermaid Singing, rather than in The Sponge Divers. Clift's statement above, 'I was sick of being a literary hod-carrier' must be taken into account but the statement was made however, after the return to Australia when Clift had established herself as a writer and popular columnist and generally respected 'woman of letters' and was making her own career. The disenchantment of the 'literary hod-carrier' statement may well have come with hindsight; it seems unlikely that she would have expressed the collaboration or lack of it quite that way in 1955.

There are also references in Mermaid Singing to the joint work, and these carry no hint of the later disenchantment.

> 'EH, MISTER GEORGE, what you fellers goin' to do here?'
> 'Write a book, Mike, as we told you.'[30]

> Kalymnos seemed a good place to go because there was a story there that was interesting which we could get to work on straight away ...[31]

and, towards the end of Mermaid Singing, thus parallelling her own book, the joint book is recorded as being finished:

> ... And then a letter came from our publisher in New York to say that the novel had been accepted. It would be published in the autumn.
> 'It's all right!' we assured each other again and again, both of us suddenly sick with relief. 'It came off after all. It's all right!'[32]

Thus Mermaid Singing seems to be presented by Clift as secondary to the joint novel, the main reason for their coming to Kalymnos.

The Sponge Divers was dismissed as a literary work by the 'Herald' reviewer, Don Edwards, who wrote:

> The Johnstons, who won a 'Herald' literary competition with 'High Valley', are always more interested in place than in characters or plot.

After briefly summarising the story, he concluded:

> Ultimately, the strength of their achievement lies in their creation of background.[33]

Edwards' comments represent a change of attitude from the comments of the 'Herald' judges who had greeted High Valley in the following terms:

"HIGH VALLEY" is on more than one account a

> distinguished piece of work. It derives no advantage from its remote setting in Tibet...[34]

The Johnstons had indeed chosen exotic backgrounds for their Joint Novels and probably felt encouraged to do this as their one attempt at a joint Australian novel, The Piping Cry, had not been able to find a publisher. There is far more to their published joint novels than mere creation of background. In The Sponge Divers, for instance, there is fine delineation of character and the use of the Australian, Leigh Morgan, to link the five parts of the book together is skilfully handled. The authors make strong and varied use of conversation to depict character and further the action. As in the previous joint books, though they are dealing with non-English speakers for the main part, there is no stereotyped semi-literate jargon. The plot is skilfully constructed with the conflict of Pelacos and his daughter leading inevitably to her drowning and the dramatic though futile rescue attempt by the strong character Manoli. The denouement, with the sponge boats leaving, is a powerful evocation of the island scene and it seems appropriate to all that has happened in this sophisticated novel. The repetition of the word 'drowned' in this different context, is a reminder of the tragedy that has provided the climax for the book.

> The beating thud of a hundred exhausts swelled into a thunder that drowned the jangle of the bells, drowned the sobbing of the women who waved from windows and balconies and the white railing by the

> sea, drowned the hymns of the church choir singing on the breakwater, the chanting of the priests, drowned all things.[35]

Whatever their contribution to The Sponge Divers, and clearly Johnston was the major partner, this was to be their last joint novel. Clift's Mermaid Singing was a major artistic achievement and Cedric Flower casts interesting light on the writing relationship when he describes Clift successfully resisting Johnston's attempts to 'correct' her style in this book and 'ginger up' the adjectives.[36]

So there were to be no more joint novels from Johnston and Clift, however, they did attempt what appears to be a genuine collaboration in 1962 with The Serpent in the Rock, a book about Hydra which they were unable to get published. The publishers' opinion was that Hydra 'was not worth a whole book'.[37] As Kinnane says: 'The only source of fresh material available to them now was within themselves, and within their relationship...'[38]

Nevertheless, Johnston and Clift were to remain a writing partnership until Clift's death in 1969. Clift acted as 'sounding-board' for Johnston in his serious writing, particularly with My Brother Jack. They were still living on Hydra when Johnston was diagnosed as having tuberculosis in both lungs and was hospitalised in Athens for some time. He was able to return to Hydra only because Clift was prepared to act as his nurse, giving him

daily injections and looking after him. Their daily routine was that Johnston would write with Clift by his side, reading each page of My Brother Jack as it was written.[39]

Clift was to write the ten-part Television adaptation of My Brother Jack, dealt with later in this thesis, to produce what is generally regarded as some of the best Australian Television to that time and this can rightly be seen as an interesting continuation of their collaboration. In an aside on the De Berg tape, speaking of her television adaptation, Clift says:

> I think that My Brother Jack is an admirable book. I admire it and respect it, and I wouldn't want to meddle with it as a book. Anyway since I've been involved in it from the beginning, I've done my meddling long since and far away.[40]

Johnston and Clift were each other's main inspiration. As their son, Martin Johnston, said:

> The fact is, to the very end, I think more than anything else, they found each other marvellous company, better company than they found anyone else. I'd say they found each other tremendously stimulating, rarely boring, frequently exasperating, indeed maddening, but a stimulus that I don't think either of them could do without.[41]

Johnston and Clift's 'collaboration' continued to the end of their creative production.

NOTES

1. HV, p.19.
2. p.9.
3. p.12.
4. p.13.
5. Albert Camus, L'Etranger, (Methuen, London, 1958, reprint 1969) p.138 (translation by GT).
6. 'Australian Society', Dec. 1969, p.39.
7. HV, p.258.
8. p.165.
9. p.260.
10. p.266.
11. For information about the Johnstons' next joint literary endeavour I am indebted to the research of Garry Kinnane, conducted for the most part in the Lilly Library, University of Indiana, USA and dealing with the Bobbs-Merrill Manuscripts. The results of this research are contained in both George Johnston - A Biography and Kinnane's Ph.D. thesis, A Critical Biography of George Johnston.
12. quoted in Kinnane, p. 104.
13. Kinnane, p.107.
14. quoted by Kinnane, letter in National Library, 21st August, 1951.
15. Ruth Park, 'Nothing But Writers', The Independent Monthly, September, 1989, p.33.
16. Clift was still working on WTTPG in 1951 but it was not published until 1960.
17. cf. Kinnane, p.120.
18. Anonymous Chinese soldiers' song of the Han Dynasty, about 150 B.C., quoted in The Big Chariot, p.xii.
19. The Big Chariot, pp.v-vii.
20. p.26.
21. Kinnane, p.125.
22. Mary Buck was Johnston's personal secretary at the office and she had typed the whole manuscript, apparently in office time. George Johnston -- A Biography contains a fascinating photograph (opposite p.144) taken at the farewell party at the Kensington flat before the Johnston family left for Kalymnos. Mary Buck is standing next to Johnston and gazing adoringly at him. Kinnane reports Clift saying at that same party:

> 'Bloody Mary; if another person mentions to me how marvellous she is I'm going to throw up on their feet!

Such a comment, revealing underlying tensions in the lives of the joint writers, indicates that Kalymnos was providing the excuse to get away, to break with the pattern their lives had become. Their life as newspaper executive and wife and mother of two children in a Kensington flat had paled. Wilfred Thomas' revelation, later in the evening, that the original reason for their

going to Kalymnos was no longer relevant, hardly even slowed the Johnstons' exodus. (see chapter, 'The Mermaid')
23. cf. Kinnane, p.125.
24. SMH, August 2, 1953, p.13.
25. Interview of Wilfred Thomas with GK, 1983, quoted, Kinnane, p.137.
26. Internal memo at Bobbs-Merrill, quoted in Kinnane, pp. 143-4.
27. 16 Feb. 1960, quoted in Kinnane, p.143.
28. quoted by Nadia Wheatley, Radio Helicon, reel 2.
29. MS 5027 GEORGE JOHNSTON FOLDER 2 Item 2, Travel Notes.
30. MS, p.15.
31. p.18.
32. p.234, underlining by GT.
33. SMH. Nov. 17, 1956, p.15.
34. previously quoted.
35. TSD, p.318.
36. Kinnane, pp. 145-6. interview with Cedric Flower, 1982.
37. Harold Ober Inc. to GJ, 22 May 1961, quoted in Kinnane, p.209.
38. Kinnane, p. 209.
39. cf. Wheatley, 'Radio Helicon', reel 3.
40. also quoted on 'Radio Helicon', reel 3.
41. 'Radio Helicon', reel 4.

IV. THE NOVELS, i. Walk to the Paradise Gardens

> ...one of the questions they always ask is, "What is your novel about?". It gives me great pleasure to look my questioner straight in the eye and put on a dead-pan face and reply nonchalantly: "Me".[1]

In addition to the joint novels, written with George Johnston, Charmian Clift was also sole author of two novels, Walk to the Paradise Gardens (1960), and Honour's Mimic (1964).

Clift apparently began work on Walk to the Paradise Gardens as early as 1952 when the Johnstons were in London.[2] Indeed, when they were 'cashing in' whatever they could in London before their exodus to Kalymnos at the end of 1954, the selling of this novel was apparently a possibility but Clift was not able to work it into an acceptable condition to send off to the publishers. It is reasonable to assume that one of the reasons for going to Kalymnos, for becoming full-time writers, was in order that Clift could finish Walk to the Paradise Gardens, her novel about her home-town, Kiama. It was to be another six years before the novel appeared. There are serious structural problems with the novel but the author's recreation of the scenes of her childhood is powerful and dramatic.

Clift prefaces her novel with the conventional disclaimer:

> This is a work of fiction. Places, people, and incidents are all only from the author's imagination.

Yet every part of the setting indicates that it is not an imaginary place. Lebanon Bay was the Johnstons' way of referring to Kiama, a town which had begun its history as a port for the shipping of cedar. The first sentence of Walk to the Paradise Gardens places the novel in Kiama.

> In the first place Julia had not really wanted to return to Lebanon Bay.

There are many more references to Kiama in the book: Cathedral Rock, a natural feature on the outskirts of Kiama, is so dramatic and important to the novel that Clift does not even change its name. The Quarry, so significant in her early years, with Clift's father being in charge of the quarry and the Clift family living in a quarry house, plays a vital and dramatic part in the novel. The main street; the surrounding countryside; 'Heifer's Back' for 'Saddleback'; the high brooding hill that dominates the town. These are all features of Kiama, easily recognisable today.

Four years after the publication of the book, Clift returned to Kiama, 'in trepidation'.[3] In the novel the protagonist, Julia, returns in trepidation and somewhat against her will. It is her husband, the supercilious and urbane architect Charles Cant, who insists on Lebanon Bay for their vacation. They are going there for their summer

holidays, despite Julia's preference for a trip to 'The Centre' where all their 'smart' friends are going. In a sub-plot, Charles has entered an important Architectural contest and he wishes to be away from Sydney if he loses and close enough to return quickly if he wins, winning being terribly important to him. Near the end of the novel we learn that he has come second in the contest. Julia explains her husband's reaction to Con, the young Greek waiter from their hotel who is essential to much of the action of the novel.

> 'No, Con. He isn't pleased. He isn't pleased because he has not won the first prize. He is humiliated because somebody else has been preferred above him. To be not quite good enough is one of the greatest humiliations we can suffer...'[4]

Being 'not quite good enough' was the fear that haunted the Johnstons on Hydra when the attempt to live as full-time writers seemed to have failed. Later, in her essay written on the death of her brother, there is an echo of this fear and of her own desire to win, when Clift says:

> For himself, I don't think now that he ever cared about the trophies and the prizes and the gold stars in exercise books...
> I lost him somewhere there, obsessed as I was by my own feverish impatience to get on to the first prizes that he didn't seem to care about.[5]

The inside cover 'blurb' to the first edition, in a somewhat banal fashion, sums up the story line and the features that presumably the publishers hoped would sell the book.

> This is a novel that examines the passionate undercurrents that sometimes break up the calm surface of a holiday.
> Julia and Charles Cant are handsome, urbane, successful people -- protected, so they think, from others, and even from themselves. They arrive on holiday at an Australian seaside resort, and although they try to preserve their separateness as outsiders, they are plunged into the tensions and violence which make up the daily lives of the people who live at Paradise Gardens. Infatuation, misunderstanding, malice and fear, fanned by smalltown gossip, distorted by the desire to love and be loved, burst out under the hot sun....

The action in the novel takes place in the rather ugly hotel where Julia and Charles stay; in 'Paradise Gardens', the tatty holiday camp into which Julia's lovely old home and surroundings have been transformed; and in the superb landscape, beaches , quarries, rocks and cliffs of the area. The evocation of this landscape, so lovingly and vividly remembered and depicted by the author, provides much of the merit of the novel. Julia's first description on again sighting Lebanon Bay is passionate and intricately and accurately detailed.

> Julia was flooded through and through with happiness. For <u>of course</u> it had been in her head all these years. All of it! The far blue hump of Heifer's Back,[6] the long, flat, misted bulk of Dooliba, and the hills tumbling down, dozens of hills, each patchily plotted with fields, veined with stone walls, and crowned with dark spread umbrellas of Moreton Bay fig. There were chalky clouds of sweet alice still blooming between the grey fuzz of the lantana patches, and in every hollow were the remembered peppercorn-trees and the willows and the rose-and-silver shimmer of hot tin roofs - Bridie's farm...
>
> From the overhang of Ferrier's Hill, even the township looked unaltered, neither bigger nor smaller than she had remembered, with its wooden bungalows and square brick villas set down in gardens on the hills and laced with the serried verticals of Norfolk

> pines about two wide shopping streets and a small harbour sheltered by two inward-curving promontories of plum-coloured rock.
>
> It had all been in her head, all of it, for all these years. Even the sea itself, so vast, so silky dark, so brilliantly glittering, brushed with moving acres of silver where the swell breathed against the sun...[7]

It is appropriate to finish the quotation on the personification of the sea. The sea is all-pervasive in the novel, and there are some marvellous descriptive passages devoted to it. When Charles and Meg Tressida make love by the sea the images of sea and sex coalesce almost surrealistically:

> He thought throughout this act that he was chasing her across the floor of the sea, his nostrils drenched in the brine smell and the muscle-mouthed plants clinging and the black weeds tangled bitter about him and his lungs crying out for air as her white body still darted and wavered before with the branch of coral between her eyes. And when at last with a cry as of death, he found his hands dragging at her silver hair and his mouth pressed burning to her brow, he knew that once for all and never again he had been given back a moment of youth and had already spent it.[8]

The author states of her 'Greek Godlet': 'CON COULD not live out of sight of the sea.' The sea, the symbolism of the sea and the very presence of the sea seem always to have been of importance to Clift. What she says of her character Con could equally apply to herself. She was dismayed, on her return to Sydney in 1964, that well-meaning friends were trying to find accommodation for the family 'in the suburbs'. The thought of having to live away from the sea was anathema to her.

In fact, one doesn't voluntarily renounce the donkey

> pace and lazy charm of island life to seek a pseudo-haven on the outskirts of a big city. One renounces it -- or at least we did -- for the Big City itself, not for its hems and fringes.[9]

There is the same feeling in the essay 'A View From a Window',[10] where Clift starts from the description of the shipwright's model of the Aegean cargo caique that stands on her window-ledge and delights in the sea and its proximity.

> Through the hand-carved blocks and the faithful intricacies of the Aegean rig I look out across the sea. Australian waters, not Mediterranean. But the model does not look alien. It sits well against its background.
>
> Here too there is an affinity with the sea and ships.

In Walk to the Paradise Gardens Clift has made Charles Cant an architect and his occupation is of importance to the theme of rejection. The holidaying couple, the Cants, have gone to the beach and, in what must constitute a splendid recall of the pleasures of her youth, the author has had them enjoy a surf in idyllic conditions. Then, as they lie on the beach in the sun, Charles finds that he has forgotten his lighter. Con, the waiter at their hotel, is conveniently nearby. He obliges with a light for Mr. Cant's cigarette, accepts the cigarette politely offered by Julia and stays, rather awkwardly, in an appropriately stilted situation. She states what is wrong, missing from the hotel;

> 'What I mean is,' Julia persisted winningly, 'is--this. Lebanon Bay is such a pretty town--so sparkling. Air and sun. Sky and sea. The hotel should be full of air and sun, too. Don't you see what I

mean?'

Con's answer allows the exposition of ideas to continue.

> 'You mean just some walls around the sunlight. Yes. Yes, that would be nice.'

This is a fitting exchange on the beach and it accords with the characters as presented in the novel. The reader is then, however, treated to a full page 'lecture' by Charles on Australian architecture, boorishness and Australian mores in general.

> 'My dear young man,' he said, 'you just try in this most braggart and moronic country to build a hotel that is only walls around sunlight! Just try! If by bribery, trickery, patience, endless skullduggery, and a miracle from God you managed to get the plans approved by the worthy boneheads of the local councils; and if, by some further dispensation of the Lord...[11]

In one of her Croxley Shorthand Notebooks, preserved in the National Library, Clift wrote the following:

> notes on northern Australian trip
>
> Kiosk people -- if you gave them the most exquisite eating and drinking place ever designed it would frighten them -- they would pass it by for the dreary familiarity of the Kiosk.[12]

This note, written towards the end of her life, shows the frustration felt by Clift as she tried to communicate her ideas about just what is wrong with Australia. In the novel, the only public platform available to her at the time, she tried to present a better way of living. Her time in Europe had shown her possibilities for better enjoyment of space and sunshine, and she yearned for these

possibilities to be given a chance in Australia. The author has a good point and some valid observations to make, though this stand is by no means original. For instance, one could cite 'The Prodigal Son', the essay written by Patrick White in answer to Alister Kershaw's The Last Expatriate. Indeed, there are interesting parallels. White speaks of his own time in Greece,

> where perfection presents itself on every hand, not only the perfection of antiquity, but that of nature, and the warmth of human relationships expressed in daily living.

White compares this with

> ...the Great Australian Emptiness, in which the mind is the least of possessions, in which the rich man is the important man, in which the schoolmaster and journalist rule what intellectual roost there is, in which beautiful youths and girls stare at life through blind blue eyes, in which human teeth fall like autumn leaves, the buttocks of cars grow hourly glassier, food means cake and steak, muscles prevail, and the march of material ugliness does not raise a quiver from the average nerves.[13]

The argument is much more effective in essay form. When Clift obtained her own 'platform' in the 'Herald' after her return to Australia she was to find the appropriate form for such material.

Australian xenophobia is handled in a more sophisticated manner than the Australian Ugliness in Walk to the Paradise Gardens. This comes about because it is essential to the action and to the plot and is properly integrated. The main theme is separation, being an 'outsider'. In the context, Charles and Julia are

'outsiders' even though Julia (like Clift) was born in the town. They are a different class and are treated as different, looked up to by the locals and deferred to. Meg Tressida of 'Paradise Gardens' sums it up when Charles asks her for a dance at the Oddfellows' Hall, the local Palais de Danse.

> 'I think you're just being kind to me, and that really you dance beautifully,' she said. 'Your wife does. But then she does everything beautifully, doesn't she?'

It is not only the naive Meg Tressida who defers to the Cants. Mr. Barbest and Mr. Caley, who represent 'the town', 'big frogs in their little puddle', are extremely deferential. Through description and conversation, Clift illustrates the 'differentness' of the outsiders.

> Mr. Barbest and Mr. Caley, finally acknowledging defeat, turned their attention to Charles. Charles was fascinating to them, a somewhat terrifying person to be approached with caution, feeling their way through their words warily, ready in a second to skip back, to contradict each other or even themselves, to placate him with outrageous flattery.
>
> 'It's rather like two small dogs trying to make friends with a camel,' Julia said.
>
> 'A camel! Julia!' Charles looked hurt.
>
> 'Oh yes, I think so.' She burst into laughter. 'Something large, you know, and supercilious, and terribly exotic. Beyond doggy comprehension.'

The Australian xenophobia is linked with the 'outsider' theme and examined and illustrated through the other main characters, Roy Tressida and Con the waiter. They are outsiders because of their foreignness. Roy Tressida is English and is condescended to by the locals. He is first described as a 'Pommie fellow', and this

designation stays with him.

> There--see? That's the Pommie chap we were talking about. Tressida.

His main virtue in the eyes of 'the town' is that he tries to assimilate.

> Mr. Barbest said uneasily, 'Well, you can't say he doesn't make an effort to fit in, like. Joined up the Rotary branch along the coast, the Chamber of Commerce... Oh, yes, you can't say he doesn't try to fit in.'

The author is at pains to depict Roy Tressida as jealous, sadistic and brutal but at least he does 'try to fit in'. On the other hand, Con is depicted as kind, obliging, thoughtful, skilled and talented but he is deeply resented because of his failure to 'try to fit in', despite his relishing of surf, sand, sun and things generally thought of as important to Australians. His employer, the larger-than-life Mrs. Swanson, deeply resents Con, despite his excellence as an employee.

> --she scarcely missed a movement that Con made, nor an opportunity to contrive some small persecution to humiliate him.
> 'You've got to keep an eye on these dagoes!' she said, in attack rather than in defence, and once, incredulously, to a commercial traveller: 'That Greek poofter wears a necklace!'

The discrimination is succinctly summed up in these lines. Clift brutally depicts the boorish insensitivity of Australian xenophobia.

With its insistence on social distinctions and their clear delineation, Walk to the Paradise Gardens can be considered to be an Australian novel of manners. James W.

Tuttleton in his work The Novel of Manners in America provides a useful definition:

> By a novel of manners I mean a novel in which the manners, social customs, folkways, conventions, traditions, and mores of a given social group at a given time and place play a dominant role in the lives of fictional characters, exert control over their thought and behavior, and constitute a determinant upon the actions in which they are engaged, and in which these manners and customs are detailed realistically---with, in fact, a premium upon the exactness of their representation.[14]

Clift is engaged in social commentary and she is putting that commentary above considerations of plot, 'confessional or autobiographical statement'.[14] The ogreish Mrs Swanson would hardly have employed Con in the first place and certainly would not have 'kept him on' so long in the normal course of events. It is important to the social commentary that he remain an employee and as soon as the action of the novel demands, it is just as important that he be sacked. Roy Tressida, English outsider, ingratiates himself with the locals by his discrimination against the Greek outsider, emphasising his and their xenophobia. In a wrenching scene, Roy Tressida humiliates him in front of Mr. Barbest and Mr. Caley and the Cants. Con had been particularly fond of the Tressidas' canary. Pretending to give the waiter Con a tip, Roy Tressida palms off on him the dead canary.

> 'Thank you, Mr. Tressida.' Con's hand, reluctantly extended, met Roy Tressida's. An expression of confusion spread over the Greek boy's face. The chuckle throbbed up out of Roy Tressida's slim throat and burst in a wave of laughter. Julia, looking up sharply, saw, at the level of her eyes, Con's big

> brown fingers clutched convulsively about the tiny stiffened body of a dead yellow canary.

The description leaves no doubt where the narrator's sympathy lies. Caley reinforces the community attitude:

> 'It's a funny thing about these dagoes,' Mr. Caley said a little later, 'but they've got no sense of humour. Ever noticed it?'

The Cants are depicted as being of a separate social class and they provide a foil to the local insular Australian values and attitudes. In his grandiose and condescending manner, Charles defines himself to Con:

> 'No trouble at all, my boy,' said Charles airily. 'I am the last xenophile in a land of phobes. I look upon it as my bounden duty.'

By separating himself from the prejudices of xenophobia, Charles implies that the 'small-town' attitudes depicted are indeed widespread and general in Australia. Clift has thus managed to convey her ideas about Australian attitudes by illustrating them within the novel and showing the unfairness and mindlessness of the discrimination.

Walk to the Paradise Gardens has significant Gothic aspects. In her seminar on 'Post Colonial Gothic',[15] Dorothy Jones outlined the rise of the Gothic as a departure from the realist mode and identified the characteristics of the Gothic novel. She thus provides a most useful framework within which to examine Clift's novel. Amongst other characteristics Jones listed: the rhetoric of fantasy, focus on a doomed outlaw figure,

descriptions of landscape and weather, supernatural agency, the small town, the mad wife, great emotional power of the landscape, social differences, sexual and moral degradation, the outsider figure and the theme of enclosure, imprisoning constraints and murder. All of these characteristics are present in Walk to the Paradise Gardens.

Clift had used a dramatic Gothic passage in Peel Me a Lotus,[16] to present the horrific scenes on the island immediately before the arrival of the film crew. In this novel, however, the Gothic permeates the whole work. Meg Tressida, wife of the jealous, sadistic and murderous Roy, is a woman who feels alone and isolated in a small community to which she doesn't belong but where she is constrained to remain. She lives in a house which by its setting and construction can be seen as 'Australian Gothic'. It is dramatically presented to the reader in the following passage:

> ...its disused metal crushers, gaunt and sagging into the slag, were like rusted and toppling gun-turrets, the ruined casemates of a time as old ago as Jutland. The sea foamed at rock bows eroded into the shape of an old ironclad's rammed prow, washing into Broken Barrel Beach on the one side, and swirling around the ugly hidden reef known as Solomon Sands and back against Lilian Beach on the other. High on the slope that stood beyond the quarry and dipped down to Lilian Beach stood the old house Bombora, which lately had suffered a change of name to Paradise Gardens.
>
> It was an uncompromisingly square house, built of quarried blue stone blocks, and in defiance of local custom it faced the best aspect, the north-east, with a sweeping outlook of Pacific sea and sky and gulls, and wet rocks, and sands hissing the tides. Behind

> and around the house spread oleanders and figs and corals, and the wings of slate-roofed outbuildings that embraced a single majestic Norfolk pine.[17]

Thus with alliteration, personification and evocative description, Clift romantically depicts the house 'Bombora'. The name, which has 'suffered' the change to the ironic 'Paradise gardens', is an Australian reference to the treacherous whirlpool which forms off rocky cliffs and points and drags unwary ships and swimmers to destruction. It is thought to be the origin of Bombo,[18] the beach where Clift grew up.

Like Meg Tressida, the protagonist, Julia is also constrained and alone, but in a moral sense, in a community where she once belonged. The Greek, Con, has some of the characteristics of the doomed outlaw figure. The social differences are strongly drawn and illustrated. There is reference to the supernatural in the recurring image of the mysterious Selina and the rock high above the quarry where she stood. The setting provides the appropriate background: Cathedral Rock, the great Quarries and Selina's Rock from where her lover is believed to have plunged down the quarry to his death and where she kept the lonely vigil. This is about as Gothic as one could expect in Australia. The 'traditional Gothic paraphernalia...moats, drawbridges, dungeons and towers' could hardly be appropriate. But more important than 'the paraphernalia of haunted houses and such' are the

'psychological and sexual attitudes'.[19] In Roy Tressida there is the insanely jealous sadistic husband who attempts to murder the innocent young man who he wrongly believes is his wife's lover. In Meg Tressida there is the weeping heroine with a strange birthmark on her forehead. She 'gives herself' to Charles Cant almost in a trance. Clift's description of the act has many Gothic elements:

> She came to him like an enraptured victim and he ravished her as wordlessly as she submitted, on a patch of dry sand shaped like a coffin and heaped around with rotting weed where the sand-fleas skipped.

'Enraptured', 'victim', 'ravished', 'submitted', 'rotting', there is much of the macabre and the melodramatic. The 'patch of dry sand shaped like a coffin' provides a striking Gothic image and presages in romantic fashion the death that is to follow from the cliffs above. The rotting weed adds to the image, combining the beach setting with decay. The skipping sand-fleas add an Australian element to the scene, building on the image of decadence and inserting a brutal reality. One can see the influence of the romantic novels here, although the skipping sand-fleas do rather bring the reader back to reality. Charles represents for Meg Tressida something quasi-supernatural and his appearance at that time and place seems inexplicably fatalistic.

In the National Library collection in Canberra there exists in one of Clift's notebooks, in her own hand-

writing, the list: '10 best books, or books which have most influenced me'. After the list of ten, Clift has written: 'Indiscriminate devouring of romantic novels'. This devouring contributed to the romantic and Gothic elements of Walk to the Paradise Gardens.[20]

Ruth Park sees Clift as choosing 'to splash and flounder in the treacherous bog of the roman a clef'.[21] If so, this must further limit the book, as identification of personalities from a small country town in this way has little literary or general significance.

Clift does seem to have been experimenting with different genres, the novel of manners, the Gothic novel, and perhaps, as Ruth Park suggests, the roman a clef. None of these genres is sufficiently developed in the novel and indeed, the presence of each detracts from the effectiveness of the others.

Though interesting, if only as a signpost to where the writer was heading, this novel must be seen as unsatisfactory. Its many years of apparently difficult gestation failed to produce any unity of theme or form. The setting, so lovingly recreated from memories of childhood, is evidence of Clift's descriptive powers but the flimsy story of the architect who comes second in a contest fits uncomfortably amongst the quarries and beaches.

Clift obviously feels strongly about Australian

architecture, Australian ugliness and the 'cultural cringe'. These are themes she will deal with at length and much more effectively in the essays.

NOTES

1. Charmian Clift, "Autobiography in the Novel", The Australian Author April 1969, p.3.
2. Kinnane, p.138
3. In 1964, after the Johnstons' return to Australia, Clift made a return trip to Kiama bringing her husband with her. She was commissioned by the local paper to write an article about her homecoming after so many years. She did this and it was published on the front page of the 'Kiama Independent' with an accompanying photograph, on Friday, December 11, 1964. (see appendix ii)
In the article Clift mentions her trepidation about returning and refers to her memories of the place.

> More than anything, I realise how beautiful Kiama is as a town, and I have lived in some very beautiful places since I grew up there. In retrospect it seems incredibly silly that I returned to my home-town in trepidation, half-fearful that nothing would be as I had remembered it for so many years in so many strange places.

Clift was later to use much of this article in one of her essays for the 'Herald', omitting the name Kiama and a few specific references.('Youth Revisited', p.35 I in A.)
4. WTTPG, p.163.
5. I in A, pp.117-118.
6. Saddleback, Barren Grounds, Bombo Hill, GT.
7. WTTPG, p.9.
8. 153
9. 'The Joys of a City', I in A, pp.83-4.
10. I in A, p.79.
11. WTTPG, pp.36-7. There is much more in this vein. GT.
12. Ms. 5027, 'The Johnston Papers'. Clift's last 'Herald' essay, which appeared posthumously, was entitled 'Anyone For Fish and Chips'. It dealt with the theme outlined in the Croxley notebook.
13. H.P. Heseltine & S.Tick, The Writer in the Modern World, 20th Century Prose, (F.W.Cheshire, Melbourne, 1962) pp. 116-7.
14. James W. Tuttleton, The Novel of Manners in America, (University of North Carolina Press, 1972) p.10.
15. cf. Dorothy Jones' seminar, 'Post Colonial Gothic: The Scarecrow, The Double Hook, Tourmaline', New Literatures Research Centre, The University of Wollongong, 27th August, 1991.
16. cf. chapter 'Lotus Eaters'.
17. WTTPG, p. 19.
18. discussions with residents living around Bombo, in particular Mrs. Myrtle Hardy, former postmistress of the now closed Bombo Post Office. GT.
19. cf. Linda Bayer-Berenbaum, The Gothic Imagination, (Associated Universities' Press, Rutherford, New Jersey,

1982) p.20.
20. In her list of the ten books which have most influenced her life, Clift lists Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Kafka and 'the Russian giants'. Her reading of Emily Bronte, particularly Wuthering Heights may have influenced the structure of Walk to the Paradise Gardens.
21. Ruth Park, 'Nothing But Writers', 'The Independent Monthly', September, 1989, p. 32.

V. THE NOVELS, ii: HONOUR'S MIMIC

> Emily Bronte invented Heathcliffe(sic) and Kathy perhaps to prove her conviction that passionate love can be so strong as to continue existing beyond death. Or perhaps it was not a conviction but only a yearning that such a thing might be possible. But eventually what lifts this novel to glory is not the passion of Heathcliffe and Kathy but the passion of Emily Bronte and her fierce will, her indomitable spirit and that more than hint of demonic in her nature which has gone on existing long beyond her physical death. So perhaps she proved her point after all. When Kathy says, "I am Heathcliffe" she is speaking no more than the truth. Of course Kathy is Heathcliffe, and Heathcliffe and Kathy both are Emily Bronte.[1]

Clift wrote the passage quoted above in 1969. Her second novel, Honour's Mimic, had been published in 1964 and she was clearly influenced, in this novel about passionate love, by the Bronte masterpiece. Her protagonist, Kathy, even bears the same name as the Bronte heroine though of course the story is in no way a mere transplantation of Wuthering Heights from the Yorkshire moors to the barren Greek island.

In her earlier novel, Walk to the Paradise Gardens, Clift attempted at times to present her ideas on such topics as 'Australian ugliness' and xenophobia. These ideas did not always sit comfortably within the framework and so detracted from the novel. Honour's Mimic is more

artistically unified than the 'Kiama' novel, less experimental and more successful.

Honour's Mimic is set very clearly on Kalymnos, the Greek island where the Johnstons lived for a year from December 1954. As was mentioned above, in the chapter on 'The Joint Novels', Clift and Johnston had given up their life in London and come to this remote island to write a joint work about 'The Kalymnos Scheme', which Wilfred Thomas, the broadcaster, had told them was,

> the brainchild of the Greek Consul in Melbourne at the time, Eugene Gorman, who had learned that the sponge-diving industry on Kalymnos was failing... The plan was to bring the divers to Darwin as a means of reviving the ailing pearl industry, since the war had made it no longer feasible to use Japanese divers. The Kalymnian divers would, it was thought, be able to earn enough money to bring their families to Australia, and two problems would be solved in the one stroke.[2]

After going to the studio and listening to the Wilfred Thomas programme, Johnston and Clift decided to go to Kalymnos. It was to be their 'escape'; a way out of a situation which had become increasingly difficult for Johnston.[3] For Clift, this was the chance to prove herself conclusively as a writer, and particularly as a novelist. She had been having trouble with Walk to the Paradise Gardens, perhaps because she still felt too emotionally close to the events of her childhood and adolescence.

The "Kalymnos Scheme" was, however, called off. Wilfred Thomas made the announcement of this to a stunned audience at what was in effect the Johnstons' 'farewell

party'. Garry Kinnane captures the scene:

> ...there was a moment of gloomy silence after (Thomas) spoke. It was broken by Johnston, who piped up 'What the hell -- we'll go anyway: it's too late to change -- we'll just have to see what happens.' 'We can't go back now,' rejoined Clift, 'I've already cancelled the order for the winter coal!'

These spontaneous reactions show clearly that the Johnstons wanted desperately to get out of London and out of the sterile life-style that they felt circumscribed them and inhibited or prevented their creative output. Johnston's 'Micawber-like' response, 'something will turn up', brings to mind the 'Golden Boy' of the Meredith trilogy and reveals a part of his character which to some extent accounts for his later disillusionment and conviction that 'it had all been a failure' when the Hydra experiment 'turned sour'. Clift's humorous response shows at once her support for her husband and that wit that was to endear her to her essay readers much later. She is in a domestic situation but she sees the humour of it and rises, or is seen to rise, above the constrictions of domesticity.

On this note of bravado began the adventure that was to last some ten years and completely change their lives. For Clift, the year on the island of Kalymnos provided the material and background for her personal experience book, Mermaid Singing, and her novel, Honour's Mimic, and although the Johnstons did write their joint novel, it was not about the exodus to Australia but about the sponge

industry, The Sponge Divers.[4]

It was to be another ten years before Clift would produce Honour's Mimic, her powerfully emotional novel dealing with a protagonist who has many Clift-like characteristics. Perhaps she needed to distance herself from something which touched her closely before she could put it into a book.

The novel takes its title from a quotation from John Donne, which also begins the book.

> . . . compar'd to this ,
> All honour's mimic, all wealth alchemy.

For the novel's protagonist Kathy, as for Clift, 'All honour is mimic', compared to the grand passion. As she herself indicated in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter, she is to be found in her writing. Autobiographical attribution in creative writing can often be doubtful but there can be little doubt about the autobiographical nature of this novel. There is only one Australian in the novel; she has recently attempted to take her own life; she has two sons, she drinks and smokes, is defiant of accepted behaviour and restrictions on her conduct and wears slacks, as Clift did on Kalymnos, to the horror of the Greek women. In the novel the Greek maid, Aliki, even peers through the keyhole of the bathroom as she 'disbelieved in Kathy's sex entirely'. Kathy goes into bars, conduct unheard of for a woman on Kalymnos at that time. As Clift says in her essay Social Drinking,

> On Kalymnos, the first Greek island where we lived for any time, I was the first woman ever to drink in a taverna.[5]

And, like Clift, Kathy strongly resists the attempts to make her conform to male-centred concepts of respectability. The hypocritical male representative of this respectability is Demetrius, the husband of her sister-in-law Milly. Kathy of the novel is Charmian Clift as she was and as she wished to be known.[6]

The Clift figure Kate in George Johnston's Closer to the Sun, closely resembles Kathy of Honour's Mimic. It is interesting that both protagonists have virtually the same name. In addition, the Johnston book is dedicated 'For Ketty Christopoulos', and 'Ketty' is the name given to Kathy in Honour's Mimic by her lover, Fotis the diver. It is a name that rings through the book, often expressing the anguish and bewilderment of Fotis: 'What will you do now, Ketty?' In both novels, however, Johnston and Clift make the obligatory disclaimers that the works are fiction.

Honour's Mimic is a romance but, like High Valley, it avoids the banal, particularly in its ending. Kathy, Australian-born but married to a 'very English' Englishman, has come to 'the island' to convalesce from an accident. She later tells Fotis that the accident was an attempt at suicide.

One of the results of the accident is that her hair

has been cropped, giving her an even more 'un-feminine' appearance. Apart from convalescing she is 'trying to work things out' and providing companionship for her sister-in-law Milly during her first pregnancy. Milly has married the rich sponge-merchant Demetrius in what the author indicates is not a 'love-match' but a piece of male pragmatism.

> How like him to have imported everything, even to the young dam on whom he would sire a half-English generation.

Milly has been plucked from her background by Demetrius, the 'outsider', the foreigner in that ambience. Clift evokes the English scene and the subtle way the foreigner is made to feel his 'foreignness'.

> Afterwards, with the sound of the horn still plangent among the Cotswold Hills, they had drunk mild-and-bitter at the Mount in Stanton, and Milly had talked hunting and horses with farming men in leggings and flat caps who had looked at him contemplatively from their light northern eyes and politely made room for him at the fire before they turned again to the Squire's daughter who belonged to them in spite of this foreign chap. It was the same excluding politeness he had experienced at her parents' table. Obscurely, it satisfied him. And standing there in his correct country tweeds...[7]

Clift presents a picture of unambiguous social cohesion, using the most connotative words to set the Cotswold scene and insinuating the actual language of the social set to show at once its exclusiveness and its attraction for the foreigner. She brings the senses into play and creates the 'idea' of England with 'the sound of the horn still plangent among the Cotswold Hills'; the

drink is English, the pub is familiarly referred to as 'the Mount in Stanton', without the clutter of the word 'pub' or 'hotel'; even the name 'Mount' connotes horses and hunting. She uses alliteration, exclusive colour with 'light northern eyes', class distinction combined with class ease in the juxtaposition of 'farming men' with 'the Squire's daughter', to create the sense of a settled society where people know their place. Clift is exploiting the ideas of a novel of manners in a way that is appropriate to the story. The classification of Demetrius as 'this foreign chap' separates him from the natural participants in the scene. Although his country tweeds are 'correct', he can never be fully accepted as a part of this world but he can, and does, take away the daughter 'who belonged to them'. Honour's Mimic deals mainly with class, class barriers, social differences and outsiderness. The scene for the conflict on the Greek Island has been clearly set in the Cotswold Hills. Kathy, the Australian, establishes herself in this same scene as an outsider figure, allying herself with her eventual enemy Demetrius in this setting of gentle but definitive exclusiveness:

> (It had been Kathy, so very beautiful then, who had given him a wry look through the bewildering beef-red faces braying at one another over Lady Bassett's mahogany, a look conspiratorial almost, as if to say, 'You and I, poor foreigner, are alien here')

On Demetrius' island Milly, so secure in her

Cotswolds, is now very much the bewildered foreigner.

> Milly looked aggrieved. 'Oh yes, it's all very well for you, darling. You'll go back to London and never have to see any of their stupid faces again. I mean, you don't have to live among them. For--all--your--life!' And she had looked up then, her face suddenly crumpled with fright.

Demetrius can be seen as a 'Rochester figure',[8] in the sense used by Molly Hite, discussing Jean Rhys' novel Wide Sargasso Sea, and Milly has elements of a 'Jane' figure. She is kept in subjugation by her otherness, by Demetrius' situation and because she is female. Hite's quotation from the Rhys text, 'This place is my enemy and on your side',[8] though used in a contrary sense, describes Milly's position on the island. Clift exploits the device of having her characters as both insider and outsider in different situations. Demetrius is the outsider in England and the insider on his island, while Milly is the comfortable insider in England and the estranged outsider on the island. There are important differences in their situations and these spring from situation and sex. Demetrius is an outsider in a society which he admires and he knows that his 'exile' is finite as he will be returning permanently to the society in which he is accepted, respected and in charge of his own and others' fate. Milly leaves the society where she is safe and accepted to a society where her otherness is apparently infinite. It is the fact that Milly is female that constitutes much of her constriction of freedom, and, to

accentuate this point, Clift depicts Milly as almost archetypically female, in contrast to the boyish Kathy. It is through her 'boyishness' and her attempts to break through constraints which seem to be arbitrarily imposed by male prejudice that Kathy seeks to rise above the constraints of otherness and of being female. This, in a society where male prejudice is reinforced and almost sanctified by social custom.

Despite the condescending male prohibitions of Demetrius, Kathy forms an alliance with the diver Fotis who is at the exact opposite of the social spectrum from Demetrius. Later, in her essays, Clift is to refer to her own 'low-life prone-ness'.[9]

There is a leit-motif in the novel of 'going to Australia'. Escape is a major theme and it takes many forms. For the divers, Australia is 'the promised land'.

> 'Lots of fellers here want to go to Australia.' the diver said, conversationally.
> 'Yes?'
> 'Sure. Plenty fellers.'...
> She said, carefully: 'Do you want to go to Australia too? Like the others?'
> He looked at her then, obliquely, but still with the nerve twitching, and his throat corded in tenseness. 'Don't know someone to write the paper. Got to have the paper to go to Australia.' Tiny pale points of heat in his eyes, silver hot like charcoal embers. The desire hot and fierce, consuming.
> So that is what he wants of me, Kathy thought, and was shaken with disappointment like tears.[10]

There is no escape to Australia for Fotis, or, through Kathy, for any of the other islanders who flock to ask her assistance. The escape, impossible from the start,

becomes subordinate to the passionate, despairing love affair which erupts between the two protagonists. They do in a way have their escape for a while, a spiritual and sexual escape into their passion and physical love for each other. The first love-making of Kathy and Fotis follows very closely on her telling him that she has tried and that there is no hope of his migrating to Australia. The act is subtly and skilfully portrayed in a few words with the symbolic use of the fragment of glass and the wedding ring to add meaning to the act and to point towards the consequences.

> As he came towards her she clenched her fist, and the thin curl of iridescent glass, forgotten, crunched against her wedding ring and bit swift as a snake into the flange of her finger. So that there was blood on his face as well as the rain or the tears.[11]

There is an economy of language in this passage, as a great deal of information is provided or alluded to. Images crowd into those few lines: the clenched fist, the symbol of defiance; the wedding ring, the symbol of her marriage; the swiftness of the snake, the universal symbol of evil, of retribution; the blood, symbol of life and allusive to the virginal blood so important in Greek marriage ceremony. Fotis will later try to emulate just such a ceremony with Kathy in what is doomed to be a parody. There is the image of the rain and the tears, sorrow mingling with nature and rain which, on dry barren Kalymnos, is the very force of life. Their destiny and the

inevitability of their destruction can be seen to flow from this act of love and defiance. The lovers are both fully aware of the impossibility of their situation.

The act of love between Kathy and Fotis is however far more than symbolic. It begins an episode of passionate love between them, at first discreet, though discretion is difficult on the small gossip-ridden island. The affair becomes more and more open until the two live together for a while in a bizarre make-believe situation that is doomed because of all the forces arrayed against them. Fotis is confused more than anything else by what has happened though he becomes besotted by Kathy and swept along by the all-consuming passion.

The immense cultural and social gaps between the protagonists are exploited by the novelist in a social commentary which, while secondary to the story, is subtly yet powerfully presented. In an important passage, just after the first act of love-making, the differences in the sexual situation of the women are presented through the puzzled mind of Fotis:

> In fact he had scarcely thought of her as being a woman at all, in the sense that Irini was a woman or the little Lookoomi (Milly) was a woman. Irini was a familiar woman he could have whenever he wanted, and the little Lookoomi was an unfamiliar woman he could never have but might imagine having--although there was no question but that they were both women, with unambiguous womanly functions--and Kathy was the woman he could simply not have imagined himself as having.... So that he was amazed at and frightened of what he had done as soon as he had done it, and her abandoned weeping seemed to him the most terrifying thing of all. He had the feeling that his act had

> been utterly sacrilegious, not because it had occurred in a chapel, but because of his own appalling temerity in taking her like that: he attached infinitely more superstition to her than to the church which sheltered them...This one might have been the first woman in the world, or a completely new species. So perhaps some remote shepherd-boy ancestor might have felt on discovering that the nymph with whom he had just dallied was not, after all, mortal.[12]

Fotis senses the mysterious power of womanhood by a consideration and comparison of the three different women whom he knows: one from Australia, one from England and the other from the island. They are different in origin, in social class and in their relationship with him. By having him attach more superstition to the woman than to the church and by treating his act of 'taking' the woman as more sacrilegious than the desecration of the chapel, Clift is emphasising female mysteries, alluding to the pre-Christian matriarchal nature of Greek society. The image of the shepherd-boy ancestor and the nymph embraces Greek mythology and the supernatural to add significance to the act of love and allude to the destiny of the lovers.

Demetrius, Kathy's host and presumed protector on the island, represents oppressive male patriarchy. His insistence on his protector role is resented by Kathy.

> 'But I am <u>not</u> your sister-in-law, I am Milly's sister-in-law,' Kathy would insist with a vehemence that surprised her, and Demetrius would look at her with his calm black eyes and acknowledge that little current of antagonism that sometimes sparked between them, and he would smile as he pointed out that here relationships were different.
> 'Here you are my sister. Here I am your brother. And

> in the absence of your husband I am also your guardian and your protector. How do you like that?'
> 'You are a damned oriental,' she said. 'Demetrius Pasha!'[13]

When Demetrius later rapes Kathy, the hypocrisy of his condescension and pomposity is highlighted. Kathy's vulnerability is demonstrated by Demetrius' smugness.

> 'I could yell,' she said evenly, in a normal conversational pitch.
> 'But you won't,' he said.

The novel then moves swiftly and inevitably towards the tragic end for the lovers. Kathy is banished from the island but, before going, she begs Demetrius to give Fotis a place on a diving boat.

> 'Even if he has to die for it?'
> 'Yes,' she said. 'Even then.'

Then, in an almost biblical but certainly not inappropriate ending, Kathy, 'the woman found in adultery', is stoned in the street.

> 'She scarcely felt the stone when it hit her'.

One is reminded of Nathaniel Hawthorne's <u>The Scarlet Letter</u>, where the woman bears the stigma of adultery. Clift stated that she was exploring in <u>Honour's Mimic</u> what would be likely to happen to a woman who transgressed the mores in a foreign culture; in so doing she explores the lot of the female in society generally. It is a young grinning boy who throws the stone, underlining the continuance of male patriarchy and the subjugation of the 'other'.

NOTES

1. Charmian Clift, 'Autobiography in the Novel', The Australian Author, (Autumn Issue--April, 1969) pp.3-7.
2. Kinnane, p.137, based on personal interview with Wilfred Thomas in 1983.
3. This is well documented in Kinnane, chapter VI.
4. The novel was released by Bobbs-Merrill in America under the title The Sea and the Stone.
5. I in A, p.2. On my visit to Kalymnos in 1988, I found that the bars seemed to still be an exclusive male domain. GT
6. cf. Appendix 'Death and Suicide': 'We were an alliance...against the world of adults and authority'. The Charmian Clift remembered by her contemporaries in Kiama: 'Nobody could stop Charm from doing whatever she wanted to do.'
7. HM, p.9. Clift and Johnston and the family had spent six months in a 'Tudor farmhouse in the Cotswolds'. cf. WOCC, p.34.
8. Molly Hite, The Other Side of the Story, (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1989) pp.40-41.
9. WOCC, p.16.
10. HM, p.72.
11. p.109.
12. p.110.
13. p.39.

VI. POSTSCRIPT: THE NOVELS

There are important similarities between Walk to the Paradise Gardens and Honour's Mimic. Both clearly have to do with escape. Kiama, Lebanon Bay in the novel, provides a temporary escape for the Cants, physically and socially, as they move to a totally different milieu. For Con and Meg Tressida it is important to escape from Lebanon Bay and all it represents for them: prejudice, cruelty, sadism. The psychological escape from her terrifying husband is achieved by Meg in her strangely unreal love-making with Charles Cant. The physical escape comes about through the quarry which claims her husband after the struggle when he tries to send Con to his death.

There is little denouement to the novel however as the reader doesn't really know what happens to Con and Meg and the little girl. The Cants scurry back to the big city to get away from 'the whole squalid business'. The final thought seems to be: '...but what had Charles got to be so smug about?'[1]

Honour's Mimic is equally a novel of escape, or attempted escape. After a failed suicide attempt the protagonist, Kathy, escapes to a Greek island and then

attempts to escape from the restrictions of class, married life and convention by means of a hopelessly doomed passionate love affair with the out-of-work diver Fotis. The reader is probably meant to assume that he will be killed on the diving trip. The last we see of Kathy is when she is hit by the stone in the street.

Both novels have to do with main characters who are in effect having an affair with someone below their own social class and in each case it is the man to whom the distinctions of class are vitally important. Charles and Demetrius are both snobs, aware of what they perceive as their superiority and at some pains to preserve it. The Clift-like characters of Julia and Kathy rebel against the pretentiousness of their husband and/or protector. Both have to put up with being lectured hypocritically by their male companions.

Clift is showing the unfairness of the privileged male position. Exploration of masculine hypocrisy will appear again in the essays, in particular in the 'Herald' essay Second Class Citizens. Julia recognises that Charles, 'the brilliant ambitious boy from the Redfern slums', has molded her to social acceptability:

> she had been careless and wild at first, sometimes untidy in her person, slipshod about little things.[2]

He berates her for an indiscretion:

> You're behaving like some silly, gauche little titter out of high school.

Yet it is Charles who makes love to the vulnerable Meg Tressida without having to bear the consequences of his action. Johnston's 'cri de coeur' as he resigned from his position as editor of Australasian Post so many years before, after Clift had been sacked for her affair with him, comes to mind. 'This is the last time the woman pays...' he had declaimed. Johnston's resignation was accepted, apparently to his surprise, and Johnston and Clift were henceforth bound together. Clift's writings continued to show that 'the woman pays'.[3]

Demetrius takes on with relish the protector role of Kathy in Honour's Mimic, criticising her short hairstyle as un-feminine and insisting that she wear skirts and not trousers. He is unbearably smug over the incident of the letter to Australia,

> ...he laughed, his eyes warm on Kathy's discomfiture. 'Especially is judgement difficult. Isn't that so, Kathy?'
> He was laughing all over. Masculinity ascendant.

Clift's terse comment: 'masculinity ascendant' is a clear comment in itself, journalistic in its pithiness and generalised condensation. In Mermaid Singing, Clift examined the unfairness and inequality of the sexes and their roles in Greek society drawing examples from this same island. In Honour's Mimic Demetrius insists on his role as protector of Kathy in the absence of her husband and then rapes her, adding the final humiliation with his comment:

> 'If I had realised it was only hot pants bothering you I could have accommodated you long ago. I thought it was idealism.

The theme of vulnerability is important in both novels. Even the apparently strong characters are assailed by self-doubt but, in particular, there are important minor characters whose main characteristic seems to be their defencelessness. Kathy and Fotis are the complete outcasts, vulnerable to all the forces of life: officialdom, social class, respectability, Demetrius, the Sea, the community. The representative of the community who throws the stone is a small boy, indicating the entrenchment of male hegemony. Demetrius' wife Milly is even more patently helpless against the male position. The first sentence of Honour's Mimic is:

> Milly had been crying again.

This crying is developed and then Kathy sympathises with Milly linking the crying with the pregnancy:

> 'Milly love, don't worry about it so. It's the most natural thing in the world that you should cry buckets. I did both times.'

Clift continues ominously with the theme of vulnerability and 'women's lot' with the image of:

> ...the glass drops of the chandelier were misted and damp and trembling, like a cluster of Milly's tears hanging there in reserve for some real catastrophe.

The author then moves from the particular to the general:

> ...that familiar trapped look of the young wife who has just discovered herself, to her bewilderment, to be completely enclosed within the aims of her

husband.[4]

The 'real catastrophe' for Milly comes at the end of the novel when she comes late on the scene after Demetrius has raped Kathy. Kathy had been her only hope and Milly believes and is encouraged to believe that Kathy has seduced her husband. Early in the novel Kathy had hoped to influence her to be more self-assertive and to resist her husband's domination.

> Kathy wondered for a moment if it would be worthwhile prodding Milly into making a stand for her own right to existence.

Following the rape, Kathy's hopes for Milly have disappeared. There is now no possibility of escape from the traps of outsider-ness and masculine domination.

In Walk to the Paradise Gardens, Meg Tressida and Con the young Greek are also vulnerable. Society will not accept Con and Meg has become dominated by her sadistic husband. In the death of Meg's husband Roy at the quarry, Con and Meg may have found some escape, although the novelist is not hopeful. Speaking of Con's fate, she says: 'He would not be able to see the sea at all,' and not being able to see the sea would indeed be imprisonment for him. The bewildered Meg is presumably left to try to remake her life and the Cants scurry away from 'the whole squalid business'.

In Walk to the Paradise Gardens and in Honour's Mimic, the rich, the powerful, the 'upper class' seem to escape retribution. In particular the male members or husbands seem not to suffer for their actions. Demetrius gets rid of Kathy after his shameful raping of her and presumably has an even more submissive wife with the confidante Kathy discredited and removed, while Charles Cant is able to disentangle himself and escape without guilt, despite his quite important contribution to the tragedy at the quarry.

> 'He was so EXTRAVAGANT!' he shouted, as if she were to blame. 'What did he bloody well expect? You can't go through life like that!'[5]

The 'as if she were to blame' neatly shifts the emphasis on to the also vulnerable Julia...woman as the victim. Clift put much of herself into her novels and later on she was to put all of herself into her essays.

NOTES

1. WTTPG, p.206.
2. p.112,3.
3. Kinnane, p.85.
4. HM, p.3.
5. WTTPG, p.204.

VII. THE TRAVEL BOOKS

While the disappointment of the collapse of their position and status was an important factor in the Johnstons' leaving London and going to the Greek Islands,[1] there were other potent reasons behind the move. Of importance to Clift, it seems from Mermaid Singing, was the contrast between the realities of the life her children were living in London and the childhood she had had and which now seemed idyllic by comparison.

> In London it had been easy enough to theorise on the advantages the children would gain from living on a Greek Island. And the theories were sound enough as theories go.... It saddened me that at the age of seven Martin could give me an interesting and lucid account of the life cycle of a tree but couldn't climb one. Tree climbing is discouraged in Kensington Gardens. In London it had been simple to say that I did not want my children to become over-stimulated, over-sophisticated, over-educated asphalt and playing-area products. My own Australian childhood had been wild and free. And although the details and even the names of the games we played then were lost to me, I had never lost the knowledge that was woven into those games -- a free child's certain knowledge of the limitless possibilities of the human body, the limitless aspirations of the human soul.[2]

A contrary view of Clift's motives is given by the 'Sun-Herald' reviewer of the most recent release of

Mermaid Singing, who has this to say about the Johnstons' going to Kalymnos:

> On the flimsy basis of having heard a BBC radio documentary on the Greek Island of Kalymnos, they uprooted themselves and their two small children, Martin and Shane.[3]

If an 'uprooting' had taken place, it was in the move from Australia to England. The Johnstons can be seen to have been seeking roots in Greece, which Clift regarded as her 'spiritual home'.[4] The original plan was for Kalymnos to be a stage on their way back to Australia. The Johnstons' had other reasons as well to leave England. The radio documentary mentioned above merely provided the excuse to get away. They left in the full knowledge that it was no longer relevant, determined to devote themselves to full-time writing and to support themselves and their family by the fruits of this labour. The chance meeting with Wilfred Thomas and the romance of the ill-fated 'Kalymnos Scheme' provided the stimulus and brought them to Kalymnos rather than to somewhere else. They came to Kalymnos expressly to write the joint novel which after various name-changes became The Sponge Divers. Kalymnos was also to inspire Clift to write what was certainly her best book to date and possibly her best book ever,[5] Mermaid Singing, in which she was able to convey the tremendous impact that Kalymnos, and Greece in general, had on her and her family.

Suburbia, with all its connotations, was anathema to

both Johnston and Clift as they would demonstrate in their later writings, Johnston in My Brother Jack and Clift in the essays. In Greece, amongst other things, they sought escape from suburbia. E.M.Forster portrayed the 'non-suburban' qualities of the land of their choice:

> Greece is godlike or devilish - I am not sure which, and in either case, absolutely out of our suburban focus.[6]

They had escaped, or at least they thought they had. Clift, in retrospect, summed it up on an ABC Radio programme, 'Away from it all', recorded in Sydney on 14th December, 1964. She said: "A freelance writer does have this wonderful thing of choice." But, she added: "You don't get away from it all." As the Johnstons found on Hydra, and as Clift illustrated so clearly in Honour's Mimic and other writings, "there is no escape".

Clift was later to refer to Mermaid Singing and her other 'personal experience book', Peel me a Lotus, as 'travel books'. They are of course not 'travel guides' but can be seen to be in the tradition of travel book writing as practised by D.H. Lawrence. In his book D.H. Lawrence and the Literature of Travel, Billy T. Tracy Jr. states that the success of a travel book 'depends to a large extent on the personality of its writer'.[7] In discussing the genre, Tracy quotes from Norman Douglas' essay on Charles Doughty,[8] where he says of travel writing generally, 'We want to take our share in that interior

voyage and watch how these alien sights and sounds affect the writer'. Applying this to Lawrence, Tracy says:

> Lawrence retains in full the individual angle which enables the reader to become absorbed in the traveller as well as the tale. Like Dr. Johnson, George Borrow, Samuel Butler, and Hilaire Belloc, Lawrence often found his own character to be his choicest material.[7]

The parallels with Clift's 'travel books' are implicit. Clift certainly 'found her own character to be her choicest material'. It is precisely because she is so unambiguously present in Mermaid Singing that it is successful in ways that her novels were not.

Tracy elucidates the travel genre by starting chronologically with Sterne.[9]

> Ever since Laurence Sterne sent Yorick off on a Grand Tour, travel books have retained that freedom of form which allows for the intrusion of autobiographical, scientific and historic material, and even for frequent digressions and anecdotes.[7]

As Tracy says further,

> Expressing opinion may be a flaw in a novelist, but it can be a virtue in a travel writer, if he has interesting ideas and can make them appear to flow effortlessly from his experiences. When Auden called Lawrence's travel books "essays on life prompted by something seen", he praised them for the same reason that earlier critics like Horace Gregory objected to them.[7]

The freedom of form available in the travel book genre gave Clift a release from the strictures of the novel she had ostensibly come to Kalymnos to write in collaboration with Johnston. Auden's explanation of his choice of the travel genre stresses the freedom it allows,

> I want a form that's large enough to swim in,

> And talk on any subject that I choose,
> From natural scenery, to men and women,
> Myself, the arts, the European news...[7]

This is the sort of freedom Clift was referring to when she said 'I was sick of being a literary hod carrier', as her explanation for the ending of the formal novel-writing collaboration between herself and Johnston. In the travel genre, understood on this level, Clift found a medium she could turn her talents to and a freedom she had been seeking. Clift's travel books contain much of the author's personal experience and, particularly in the case of Mermaid Singing, much of the deeply felt and appreciated conflict of cultures. The reader is certainly made aware of 'how these alien sights and sounds affect the writer'.

In the context of the travel book, Clift is able to write fluently and convincingly as she is comfortable with the narrative autobiographical form. This style of writing which Clift was to perfect is intimate and descriptive. Readers are able to identify with this Australian housewife who is sharing her adventures with them. Such empathy is skilfully created by the accessibility of Clift's prose and by her depiction of herself as a mother and wife with, albeit in an exotic setting, problems similar to those faced by women around the world.

In Clift's novels, as well as her 'travel books', place plays a major role. The joint novels with Johnston

could be set in Tibet or China but her own works, complete or planned, were either in the Greek Islands or in Kiama, places which were full of meaning for her. Her powers of description evoke the setting for the reader. Tracy discusses Lawrence's attribution of 'power to the spirit of place'. He extends the quotation from Aaron's Rod, 'I'm not only just one proposition. A new place brings out a new thing in a man'. His extension is:

> Although Lilly speaks for Lawrence in the novel, he would have been a little closer to the truth if he had said: "an ancient place brings out an old thing in a man".[9]

If one can ignore the sexism of Lawrence (Lilly) and Tracy, then the unique possibilities of the travel genre become clearer. Tracy sees this as a continuing tradition in travel books. He returns to the latter part of last century and the earlier part of this century to illustrate this point.

> (Lawrence's) predecessors in the travel book tradition were alert also to those moments when landscape transformed the consciousness of the observer. John Alcorn has even called the sensations of boundlessness and timelessness caused by a response to landscape "the central subject of naturist travel literature." In particular, both John Millington Synge in The Aran Islands (1907) and W.H. Hudson in Idle Days in Patagonia (1893) anticipated Lawrence.[9]

Clift has a readily communicable response to landscape. She is able to present the foreign setting, making it accessible to the reader in the tradition of the travel genre by clearly positioning herself in that

setting.

Thus, in Mermaid Singing and Peel me a Lotus Clift writes with authority and sureness. The following quotation from Jean Starobinski applies particularly to what Clift is doing in her 'personal experience' books.

> No matter how doubtful the facts related, the text will at least present an authentic image of the (person) who 'held the pen'...since to the explicit self-reference of the narration itself the style adds the implicit self-referential value of a particular mode of speaking.[10]

It is Clift's 'particular mode of speaking', as mentioned above, that surfaces in Mermaid Singing and differentiates it from High Valley, the other joint novels, and her own novels. She achieves narrative verisimilitude in the travel book genre at a time when she was still struggling to complete Walk to the Paradise Gardens. This is a style which will appear again in Peel me a Lotus and definitively in the essays of 1964 to 1969. In this style of autobiographical narrative we are conscious, as Starobinski says, of the 'authentic' image of the person who 'held the pen', and we are ever conscious of'...the special importance of the individual mark of style in autobiography'. To quote again from Eakin:

> Adventurous twentieth century autobiographers have shifted the ground of our thinking about autobiographical truth because they readily accept that fictions and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life.
> ...the materials of the past are shaped by memory and

> imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness.[11]

Clift selects both from her past, "My own Australian childhood had been wild and free", and from the present, "it seemed to be a fine brave way of making an arrival", to construct a vehicle for her thoughts that is informative and authoritative. The reader experiences everything through Clift and this is one of the strengths of the book. We are meeting, for the first time in a published work, the 'Charmian Clift Persona'. Martin Johnston described this 'persona' with relation to the way his mother appeared in The Essays. Martin said his mother wrote as if she were a friend talking to a friend; saying 'this is the real Charmian Clift, I'm having a chat to you over the garden fence and so on'. In Martin's opinion, this was 'a very artful fictionalised concept'.[12] This relates directly to what Starobinski is saying, '...the materials of the past are shaped by memory and imagination to serve the needs of present consciousness.'[10] Martin went on to say: 'I think she was a very private person. Her "core" was so private. She needed people on her terms.'[12] This intimate style allows the reader to share with the author the tribulations of the new experience as she exploits her finely developed sense of audience.

Kalymnos is Clift's first Greek island. She will spend a mere twelve months there before moving on to Hydra for some ten years. Yet she achieves in her writing a real

contact with the people, with the humanity of the island communities of which she and her family were a part. Garry Kinnane gives an account of Clift and Johnston's last attempt in 1962 on Hydra at a joint work,

> ...a factually based history of the island mixed with gossip about the fashionable visitors who graced its quayside every summer. It was to be called, with a certain mockery of their own source of misery in the recent past, 'The Serpent in the Rock'.[13]

They hastily sent the book off to America but there was no interest in its publication, the place being 'not worth a whole book'[13]. As Kinnane says, 'the only source of fresh material available to them now was within themselves'.[13] Clift's success with her travel books came about precisely because of the positioning of herself in the works. She produces a three-dimensional picture of the people of the Greek Islands because of her presence. We see the inhabitants in their relations with the Johnston family and they also have an existence outside this reference. In seeking to understand the importance of religion in their lives for instance, Clift reveals their humanity. By delving into the Dionysian and pagan origins and unearthing the dark atavistic currents, Clift gives a depth to the people which fully exploits the travel book genre.

NOTES

1. Garry Kinnane gives a very clear picture of the events leading up to the Johnstons' decision to leave London for Kalymnos. cf Kinnane, pp.137 et seq.
2. MS, pp.93-4.
3. 'From culture shock to friendship on Kalymnos', Sun-Herald, 5th June, 1988.
4. 'Charmian reminded me of the Winged Victory of Samothrace, and I thought this long before she learned that her spiritual home was Greece.' Ruth Park, 'Nothing But Writers', 'The Independent Monthly', September, 1989, p.32.
5. cf. 'arguably her best book'. Kinnane, p.146.
6. quoted in Overland 40, Summer 68/69.
7. Billy T. Tracy Jr. D.H. Lawrence and the Literature of Travel,(Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1983) pp. 10-13.
8. Robert M. McBride, "Arabia Deserta", Experiments (New York: 1925), quoted in Tracy, p.9.
9. Tracy, p.17.
10. "Literary Style: A Symposium", quoted in Eakin Fictions in Autobiography pp. 22,23.
11. p.5.
12. interview with Martin Johnston, broadcast by ABC RADIO HELICON, Garry Kinnane and Nadia Wheatley, 14.7.89.
13. Kinnane, p.209.

VIII. THE MERMAID

> I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each
> I do not think that they will sing to me.[1]

Mermaid Singing has a dramatic, adventurous, exotic beginning:

> We came to the island of Kalymnos in the small grey caique Angellico, belting in around Point Cali with a sirocco screaming in from the south-west, a black patched triangle of sail thrumming over our heads, and a cargo of turkeys, tangerines, earthenware water jars, market baskets, and the inevitable old black-shawled women who form part of the furnishings of all Aegean caiques.
> It seemed to be a fine brave way of making an arrival.

That first paragraph, all one sentence, contains many of the elements of style that contribute to the quality and charm of the work: the exotic names, Angellico and Point Cali; the unfamiliar foreign terms, "caique" and sirocco; the gentle use of alliteration, turkeys and tangerines; the unusual use of verbal forms, belting and the onomatopoeic thrumming; the monochromatic imagery achieved with the grey and black; the suitably archaic turn of phrase, 'We came to the island...;' the ironic picture of the 'black-shawled women' as 'part of the

furnishings of all Aegean caiques'; and the equally ironic, 'fine brave way'. All the elements are brought in to play to involve the reader with this important arrival. Any stuffiness or mock grandeur is immediately dispelled by the juxtaposition of the reality of the very next line:

'Mother of God!' gasped an old lady between vomits.

Clift has found her style here. The images are piled one upon the other just as the contents of the caique are piled and then tossed into a pellmell colourful mixture. This is personal, involved, subjective description. Clift's use of the adjective 'brave' in this way personifies the arrival at Kalymnos.

In Mermaid Singing place is important as indeed it is in all of Clift's works. Be it Greek island or South Coast of New South Wales she has the power with her descriptive writing to evoke place. Clift confidently positions herself and, with description, colour, image, personification and choice of words, brings the place to the reader, as can be seen in the following passage.

> I sit with Irini on the whitewashed step of her little blue house on the mountain-side. Below us the roof-tops have picked up a random crop of spring grass. They descend in oblongs of viridian to the harbour below, where two hundred coloured boats ride gently on a sea that is viridian too, and shining in the sun.
>
> The town is spread out beneath us like a patchwork quilt thrown carelessly down in the valley between the mountains. Here we are five hundred feet above the harbour and the shopping streets, but the encircling ring of mountains gives the illusion of having gained in height and pressed in closer. The

> rock wall, scarred and fissured, seems gaunter and more menacing from here than when seen from the town below, perhaps because here one is part of it.[2]

The physical place is thus clearly presented in such expressions as 'little blue house on the mountain-side' and the two hundred coloured boats riding 'gently'. With an overlay of the social on the landscape description, Clift uses alliterative expression and irony to point out that 'In Kalymnos panorama is the prerogative of the poor'. Only then does she introduce the poverty and the explanation of why the poor go barefoot. This passage works on many levels, emotional, personal, atavistic and historical, 'Here', she writes, 'you will see life illuminated as it was three thousand years ago'.

Travel books are read for various reasons and one of the categories of readers for this type of publication is

> 'those who are fascinated by exotic places but (whether for lack of money, time, or energy) cannot go themselves.[3]

Clift catered for these readers and for those who appreciated, to use Auden's phrase, 'essays on life prompted by something seen'. (ibid.) She is writing for readers who would have liked to have had the courage to break with the suburban life and live the Kalymnian adventure. Thus, for the actual arrival at Kalymnos, she invokes the non-Kalymnian, non-Greek reader as a sort of co-conspirator, speaking of 'George and I' as one would chat to a neighbour and revealing the 'between you and me'

secret that the children 'had been heavily laced with dramamine before leaving Kos'. The exotic names of Kos and Vathy add to the feeling of adventure and there is a sense of danger in the sequel to the arrival, added at the end of the paragraph, evoking admiration for the brave little family so far from home.

> I was not to know until some days later that two passengers on the caique from Vathy had been washed overboard that morning and all the deck cargo lost, although at the time it surprised me a little that Manolis should cross himself so fervently the minute his feet were on dry land again.[4]

Thus the reader is brought dramatically to the Greek island and is already acquainted with Manolis who will act as a very necessary 'bridge' and interpreter for the family and for the reader coming into this unknown world. With quick sketches, reported speech, the odd exotic word or phrase and a few generalisations, the islanders who will be the characters of Mermaid Singing are introduced. Clift is selective in the presentation of the characters, manipulating the material available to her in order to present her own particular view of Kalymnos. The Johnston family is the centre of a tiny universe here and the people have importance because of their relations with or significance to the family.

Although the book is, and is meant to be, autobiographical, character portrayal is important. Manolis, who has brought the family to Kalymnos, is quickly yet carefully delineated. He acts as the link

between the Johnston family and the people of Kalymnos, sharing, explaining and providing much of the gentle humour, for this is a humorous book. The humour of the unexpected and of the misunderstandings arising from the clash of cultures abounds. Among the book's other characters, the servant, Sevasti, is companion and 'confessor' to Clift and a vehicle for her thoughts on feminism. Yanni, the chauvinistic lazy Greek male, is the foil to the hard-working Sevasti and the butt of her wit, while American Mike, as an English speaker, is important to the work to provide the opportunity for some reported speech in this community of non-English speakers. Most of the other men are summed up by the collective noun 'The men'. The women and children also are mostly not differentiated from their peers. In this travel book we experience the inhabitants as they impinge upon the travellers or outsiders.

The Johnstons' first task was to find a house. Within half an hour of their arrival in Kalymnos they found the

> spindly yellow house on the waterfront, with a little cast-iron balcony overhanging the plateia and four staring windows that looked down the broad harbour road with its row of coffee-houses under the ragged casuarina trees and across to the small coloured cubes piled higgledy-piggledy at the base of the mountain.[5]

In this fragment of a sentence can be seen many of the elements of Clift's effective description. The choice of adjectives 'spindly', 'ragged', 'coloured' and

'higgledy-piggledy' with the alliterative repetition of 'd' gives a distinctive sound to the expression. They also manage to convey a sense of impermanence or insignificance with 'little' and 'small' juxtaposed with the mountain. The foreign word 'plateia' and a whole 'row of coffee houses' place the scene in a foreign setting. The personification of the 'staring windows' helps the impression of being an observer. If the reader needed anything more in order to identify with this Australian family, a family from the western bourgeois culture of the 1950's, who have broken away, then the leit-motif of the peanut butter supplies the link.

> Martin's lower lip began to tremble. His fingers tightened convulsively. Shane, always alert for a cue, took the deep shuddering breath that always heralds a bellow.
>
> 'Oh, it's awful, Mum!' Martin sobbed. 'I haven't had any peanut butter since London and I don't know what anyone is saying.

In his interview on the Radio Helicon programme, Martin recalled equating peanut butter with 'civilization' and the accompanying cultural shock that the family experienced. In this moment of domestic and cross-cultural crisis it is the Clift persona who takes charge. She is the mother/wife struggling to make a home in the foreign, threatening setting.

> 'Tell her we'll take the house.' It didn't matter if the rent was too high or the house damp or the attic infested with rats. We had come to a point where we had to stop and sort ourselves out.[6]

This grim picture is quickly softened with gentle

humour as the homely, domestic picture is painted:

> I could hear George's voice,'...and those big schooners over by the lighthouse are called depositos. You see, they carry all the food for the sponge divers to eat, because they are away from home each year for a long time, six or seven months...'
> 'Would they carry peanut butter, do you think?'

This use of a humorous, often unexpected closure was to become the hallmark of Clift's syndicated essays. The reader is actually being given important information about the life of the divers. George is being shown as the helpful husband/father but the child Martin, with the piercing insight and singlemindedness of childhood, manages to sum up the gulf between their life in a modern 'civilised' city and their primitive life here on Kalymnos.

Having described how she got her family to Kalymnos and settled them into a house of sorts, but nevertheless a house, Clift examines just why they are there. She does it through the eyes of a Kalymnian, the words of her husband and her own present and remembered thoughts and reasons.

> 'EH, MISTER GEORGE, what you fellers goin' to do here?'
> 'Write a book, Mike, as we told you.'
> 'Yeah, but...' American Mike's wizened little face was cocked sideways. He looked more than ever like a sceptical monkey. His crooked brown hands were busy with a tasselled kombolloi of big amber beads.
> 'But what,Mike?'
> Well, that's what I tellum, Mister George. I say to them, these fellers is writin' a book about Kalymnos. But plenty of people here say to me, Manolis says how you can write the permit for goin' to Australia. Manolis says no trouble for you to fixum. Plenty fellers here think you and Mister Charmian is a committee, somethin' like that.'

This dialogue is far removed from the gentle rendition of Tibetan speech in High Valley for instance. One is reminded here almost of the sort of popular dialogue in, say, a Jolliffe cartoon of the 40's and 50's. The condescension grates, particularly as the speaker is supposed to be 'American Mike'. The intended audience back in Australia in the 1950's may well have accepted this but the gaucherie could limit the book's international and intellectual appeal. Clift sums up the family's situation:

> By this time the whole town had heard our explanation - and nobody believed a word of it.

She then explains to the reader what they have not been able to explain to the people of Kalymnos: why they are there. It is a lucid yet romantic passage, typical of Clift's writing at its best, appealing to the escapist and to the rational, and encompassing the element of chance.

> Well then, about a month previously George had been despairing in the classic journalist vein about the treadmill of Fleet Street and the impossibility of writing anything worth while when your only time for creative writing was at night and then you were too drunk or too tired, and how when you reached forty your future was calculable and you felt that with every Princess Margaret Surprise and every Foreign Office Sensation you were hammering another bar into place around your cage, and now the bars had become so close and numerous that you couldn't see out any longer or remember how the sky looked or whether there was anybody left in the world who walked free.

To complete the episode, Clift artfully involves the children, bringing enchantment, echoing the title of the book and alluding to her beloved T.S.Eliot whose quotation

began the book.

> 'You are a pair of romantic babies,' said a friend of ours. 'And of course you'll live to regret this folly. On the other hand I believe that although the mermaids are mute it is necessary for everybody, once in his life, to go down to the sea and wait and listen.'

The chapter concludes with American Mike finishing his interrogation which Clift sums up, saying: 'I had the feeling that we had scraped through an important test.'

Clift gives a picture of Kalymnos and the problems that were presented in the Wilfred Thomas programme. In her account of the history of the island she touches on a theme that is to remain ever important to her: conservation and human squandering of resources.

> It is hard to believe now that this was once an island of forests and rivers, of shady groves and glens. Except of thorns there is not a thicket left, for the centuries of occupation by the Turks deforested the island with the ruthlessness of a locust plague.

Until the 1970s conservation was one of the neglected themes of the twentieth century yet Clift is here making a personal and eloquent appeal for protection of nature by passionately describing what can happen to something beautiful that is not protected. She would lose no Greek friends by thus blaming the Turks for the despoliation and by the use of the image of the locust plague.

Mermaid Singing is Clift's first book written in and about Greece. Her love of the myths, legends and history of Classical Greece is introduced with frequent references

to Dionysus the god of wine, so important to Greek life. The Dionysian cult with the breaking and tearing of the limbs of the god is echoed in the everyday life of the island. This is illustrated in the following passage where a piling up of Dionysian references ends with the poignant present day description of the boy about to escape the Kalymnian fate of so many of the divers. This fate is illustrated by the crippled diver with the similar name to the god. The boy about to escape reassuringly checks on his own limbs.

> 'Well, I've got my papers,' said the freckle-faced twenty-year-old who had joined us at the café table. 'They'll send a telegram when I have to go up to Piraeus. In five weeks or so I'll be off to Australia.'
>
> 'You're really happy about it?' George asked.
>
> 'Well,' he said matter-of-factly, 'I'm glad it was settled before I signed up for another season's diving. There are better ways of making a living. This diving, it's not a good life.'
>
> The crippled diver Dyonissos was limping down through the tables garishly hung with little sandals and children's clothes and tablecloths and women's pullovers on wooden hangers, crying the merits of a new shop opened in the narrow street beside Agios Christos.
>
> The freckled boy turned his head away and drained the little cup of coffee in a gulp, and in so doing he brushed my cigarette case off the table. I bent to retrieve it, and under the concealing table I saw that his legs were moving reassuringly, one against the other.[7]

The Johnstons actually sponsored a Kalymnian, Yanni Tsakrios, as a migrant to Australia and he was the subject of one of Clift's essays written not long after their return to Australia.[8]

Migration, particularly to Australia, is a recurring

theme in all the Johnstons' books about Kalymnos. In Mermaid Singing, however, Clift looks at migration from the women's point of view.

> When husbands emigrate, as they are doing at the rate of hundreds a year, the wives seldom accompany them. Often they do not even want to follow later. There are many women here whose husbands have been away for years. They seem perfectly content with this arrangement.
> 'When do you intend to follow your husband?' I asked one of them one day.
> She looked at me in some surprise. 'Oh, I'm not leaving Kalymnos,' she said. 'My house is here, and my children. We have good fig trees and grapes and sweet water in the well. My husband sends me good money every month and parcels of clothes. Why should I want to leave?'[9]

Had the bureaucrats responsible for the failed 'Kalymnos Scheme' gained the same sort of insight into and understanding of the people and culture of Kalymnos then the scheme would never have been seriously considered. Clift continues her questioning.

> 'But the children?' I said. 'Surely you would like the children to have a better chance in life than it's possible for them to find here?'
> 'Ah, the children...' she considers the matter half-heartedly. The children might join their father later, when they were grown a little. The boys, anyway. All boys had to go away, yes. But the girls would have their houses here, as she had, because her husband was sending back good money. All the girls would have prika. Why should they want to leave? (ibid)

Through Clift herself, Sevasti the servant/companion and the women of Kalymnos generally, we get the women's viewpoint on many issues. It is not just a debate or exposition. As the accepted outsider, Clift provides a sounding-board as ideas and customs probably never before

questioned by the islanders themselves are brought to light and examined and questioned because of the presence of this interested and sympathetic outsider. Clift is thus dealing with feminist issues in a way that enables her to bring a unique focus onto them. The progress is from the specific to the general: from the lot of women on Kalymnos it is a natural step to the lot of women generally and then to the human condition. Nowhere is this more effectively demonstrated than in the carefully constructed scene in:

> the still, sunny convent that stands among the olive trees over the mountains from Chorio, in the placid valley of Argos...[10]

The sights, smells, sounds and atmosphere are minutely evoked by Clift. Johnston is there but not as a presence and he takes no apparent part in the conversation or debate. It is essentially a male/female debate between Yanni and Sevasti and through it runs a sort of counter melody by Clift as narrator, alluding to death, conjuring up the charnel pit of bones beneath the chapel, giving little human touches:

> Sevasti lay on the bedshelf beside the children's mattress, her toes curled over to hide the holes in the feet of her stockings, one gnarled hand automatically patting the nearest small hump in the blankets.

The debate goes on for some time, interspersed as it is with descriptions, narrator's balance, allusions and the gentle, neatly styled counter melody. Even stripped

of the style it is a very effective debate and through Sevasti, Clift makes the point of women's suffering very strongly and passionately even as she claims that the passion is the Greek woman's. Sevasti's opening comment: 'This is what I should like life to be', is not completed until one and a half pages later, so carefully and completely has the scene been set.

> 'This is what I should like life to be,' said Sevasti. 'A little room like this, so clean and quiet, and every day to kneel with God among the gold and flowers. Each day quiet work; each night quiet sleep.'
> ...'If my man was only dead and I had no boy,' Sevasti went on, 'I would come tomorrow with my girls and we would each put on the habit and go into our little rooms and --'
> 'Your girls!'...'Your girls!' he repeated furiously. 'Are you mad, Sevasti? It's all very well for you; you're an old woman. (Sevasti is forty-five.) But those koritzia of yours, they need a good strong man apiece. Fine healthy girls like that! Do you want to kill them?...
>
> His vehemence quite shattered Sevasti's thoughts of serenity. She was erect and stiff on the bedshelf, and her leathery cheeks were wet with sudden tears.
> 'Blah! Blah! Blah! Big mouth Yanni! What do you know about marriage? What does any man know about marriage? Your lot only have the fun of putting the babies into us. You don't have to bring them out, or feed them, or weep over them, or fold their hands when they die for want of two hundred drachmae for a doctor! How do you know what a woman wants? Marriage is slavery, that's what marriage is.

In a disclaimer following the end of the passionate debate, Clift maintains that at this stage of her sojourn in Greece, her knowledge of Greek was minimal, consisting of a few nouns and phrases and a handful of verbs, understood only in the present tense. This is probably a

textual strategy. She has produced an effective feminist statement at a time, in the mid 1950s, when such a published statement would have been rare, particularly in a book written for a general readership. It seems reasonable to think that, far from merely recording conversation, Clift is presenting her own thoughts on marriage and women's lot, albeit inspired by the no doubt very real Yanni/Sevasti clash.

Clift makes use of her children in establishing the bond between the Greeks and herself and in establishing a commonality of experience between the Western reader and the Greek way of life. "All Greeks are fond of children"[11] she says, and elsewhere, "Children are your best insurance policy in Greece". In giving a picture of Sevasti, Clift stresses the bonding that comes about between Sevasti and Clift's two children, Martin and Shane.

> I have so many pictures of her--wry, sardonic, passionate, gentle, raffish, sad. But alive, every one of them, warm and breathing and alive. I can see her now, hanging like a pterodactyl in the upper branches of a nut tree, stealing green almonds for Martin, shinning over the wall of the richest garden in Kalymnos to find vineleaves for the dolmahdes and plunging back in a whirl of red petticoat, boxing Fotini's beautiful ears as though Fotini were still a little girl.[11]

The piling-up of vivid pertinent adjectives: 'wry, sardonic, passionate, gentle, raffish'; the colourful imagery of the 'whirl of red petticoat' and the exuberant tomboyishness of the woman she admires are all hallmarks of the Clift style which was to blossom in the essays. The

passage is followed by a little parental note which no doubt makes it easier for the stay-at-home vicarious reader to identify with this family experiencing an expatriate, exotic life-style.

> Our most constant parental problem is to prevent our two from being hopelessly indulged. But Sevasti carries her affection for Martin and Shane to the point where her protectiveness is fierce and fanatical and her solicitude as tender as if they were her own.[11]

There follow rapidly the twin calamities of "that inevitable and horrifying day when we discovered that the children's heads were crawling with lice" and that Shane had contracted Jaundice, "Ah, christophea! That's nothing!" There is an awful sort of fascination as Clift depicts "the horde of old women in black who stormed the house with long kitchen knives, anxious to work their own cures on my poor yellow child". The reader is now being asked to share the Johnstons' vicissitudes; watching them coping and coming to terms with strange ways and customs. Clift makes the adventure seem real and shared by giving her own 'western' reactions to situations and interspersing this with the exclamations and exotic phrases and incantations of the locals. The horror of the 'old women in black who stormed the house with long kitchen knives' is easily visualised and shared.

Clift's treatment of religion is important in the depiction of the people of Kalymnos as having a life of their own, apart from their contact with the Johnston

family. There as an outsider she seems nevertheless to be part of the ceremony and to be able to describe what is happening without condescension and in such a way as to involve the reader. All the time there are very human touches yet the mysticism and faith are never discounted.

> By the time we arrive the evening smells rich and strong of hot meat and oil and garlic, and there is great activity in the house and around it....
>
> In the top room-- blue walls and one of the lovely old bamboo ceilings and an entire lithographed set of the adventures of Genovefa--at least a hundred people are packed already...and a great Tilly lamp hisses a dazzling white light from the centre of the ceiling. The room is unbearably hot.
>
> The priests and musicians arrive together, all puffing from the climb. The chief figure is the old priest from Saint Stephanos, a cigarette puffing furiously in the middle of a beard like a white feather boa.
>
> Up and down, up and down, plunging and writhing and kicking, she is ducked and dipped and crossed and held aloft, and ducked and dipped again...Captain Miches and young Captain Charlie move in closer, holding in stiffly extended arms the snowy new cloth that will catch the poor purple screaming scrap. They look huge and determined. No devil, one feels, would stand a chance against them...
>
> The baby no longer screams. It gasps a little, and its tiny chest heaves and shudders spasmodically as the Sign is marked on its naked flesh--in oil and in wine, on its back and its breast and its feet and hands...Suddenly everyone in the room gives a high, wild shout of triumph. It is like a sharp nail run down your spine.[11a]

Only at this stage are Sevasti and the Australian children introduced to bring this long, exhausting ritual to an end. Shane's final comment provides the ironic closure and Clift brings the reader back from the exotic, passionate scene with a universal motherly aside.

> Sevasti pushes through the crush and hugs me tightly because she is overcome with the beauty and mystery

> of what has just happened, and she cannot convey it to me in any other way.
>
> 'Next we shall baptise Martin and Shane,' she whispers, bursting with love. 'Make them truly Greek children.'
>
> Shane's horrified pink face peers over the taper she has been holding. 'Mummy, it's without knickers!
>
> Shane has lately become modest.

In similar fashion Clift presents the rites of marriage and death, stressing what is Greek, what is Kalymnian, what is Christian and what is Pagan. In the celebration of Carnival she depicts the nightmarishly strange happenings but she relates them to her own family and to 'western' experience. Martin emerges from a ghostly sheet to reassure his mother: 'They're not our sheets.' And in answer to a question, Clift assures a local: 'No, we didn't make Carnival like this in Australia, I said, nor, as far as I knew, anywhere else in the world.'[12]

Later, on May Day, when Sevasti has the whole family up before dawn and clambering up the half-dark mountainside to see the sun rise, Clift demonstrates how 'In Greek ceremony the pagan world is always there, lingering on, dark, impenitent, enigmatic, patient.' As they are on the mountain top, gathering spiky flowers at dawn, Clift asks Sevasti:

> 'Why, Sevasti? Why?'
>
> 'Why?' She looked at me in astonishment. 'Because this is what we do in Kalymnos. This is what we have always done.'
>
> I let it go at that. Pondering drowsily upon Dionysian rites and fertility ceremonies from the days when the world was young....Perhaps once, when the understanding of things was different, so great a mystery as the rising of the sun could not be taken for granted. It was necessary for the whole populace

> to reaffirm its faith in the daily miracle on a set occasion every year...like examining one's safe deposit.[12]

By linking the past with the present, and the myth with the everyday life on Kalymnos, Clift shows its relevance to the island people. By then linking further with an everyday, somewhat prosaic 'western' equivalent, she demystifies the myth and makes the experience of the rites accessible to the reader. The Dionysian rites and fertility ceremonies are introduced gently by 'Pondering drowsily' upon them. 'Perhaps once' introduces a speculation devoid of dogmatism. The style allows the reader to enter this world without apprehension. The 'great...mystery of the rising sun' helps with the understanding of the pagan world. Then the pithy, unexpectedly contemporary nature of the Clift closure brings all into focus, forecasting the manner in which Clift would handle myth in the essays.

The sea, I thalassa, is never far away in Mermaid Singing or indeed in most of Clift's writings. Born and raised beside the sea at Bombo Beach in New South Wales, Clift readily and often admitted her need for the sea and its inspiring and cleansing properties. Garry Kinnane has described how Charmian and her sister Margaret 'could swim and surf as well as any boy in the district'[13] and, indeed, in a search through the archives and school magazines of Wollongong High School, the only mentions I

could find of Charmian Clift were as Girls' Captain of Keira House and as junior champion of the school at the swimming carnival.[14] Clift's ability and agility in the sea are a source of amazement and embarrassment to the people of Kalymnos.

> One day I was lured by an overweening pride into demonstrating the Australian crawl. The women, after their first stunned and gratifying surprise, averted their eyes. My performance, I realised, was to them something as grotesque as a trapeze act or a performing seal.
>
> 'Only men swim like that,' Yanni's wife Polymnea whispered to me in embarrassed explanation.[15]

Thus, with an everyday incident, Clift illustrates cultural, racial and sexual differences and manages to refer to her own swimming prowess. The sea is a major presence in Greek myth. The sea god, Poseidon, (Roman 'Neptune') was believed to have grown up on the island of Rhodos, part of the same group as Kalymnos. He was styled brother of Zeus and Lord of The Seas. As the ancient Greeks became great sailors, the sea and its deities were of extreme importance as life and religion were closely linked. The sea is particularly important to the Kalymnians, living as they do on a barren island, and it is not surprising that the sea permeates their lore and customs. In positioning Poseidon in 'The Olympian Family', C.M. Bowra says:

> The Greeks...were always wary of the treacherous seas. And so they prayed to Poseidon to "be kindly in heart and help those who voyage in ships".[16]

In an hilariously funny episode, the one time she allows husband George to play a major role in an incident, Clift tells of the disposal of their disgusting, broken old toilet bowl to the sea, I thalassa. The whole incident is related in an appropriately mock-heroic style as they try to dispose of the noisome article into the sea.

> At the edge of the railing George desperately pants 'one, two, three!' and heaves. But Yanni, out of synchronisation, is gasping '<u>ena, thio, tria!</u> His heave comes a fraction later.
>
> The loathsome relic slips from their grasp and breaks between them on the street with a crash that must be heard on Kos.
>
> ...The policeman has marched off into the night, looking a little angry and foolish. For a while the crowd remains standing in a mystified circle around the scattered fragments of porcelain.
>
> Two small boys at last kick the pieces into the sea.
>
> 'You see!' says Yanni triumphantly. 'It is in the <u>thalassa.</u> This, George, is the Kalymnian system.[17]

The 'punch', as always, is in the closure. What could have been a merely amusing anecdote is given philosophical and cultural point. Clift describes in detail and with understanding the rituals involved with birth, marriage and death, showing how the sea is intricately involved with ritual. She has Yanni describe his arranged marriage to her and thus to the reader. Yanni tells how, after the required three nights locked in the marriage house, he

> tried the doorhandle and it <u>opened!</u> (he continues) I crossed myself and thanked God for his goodness and ran out into the street and all the way to Lavassi. I scrambled over rocks and stones and chased the goats and stood singing on the mountain for an hour or more. And after that I scrambled down again and flung

off all my clothes and swam so far out to sea I thought I'd never be able to swim back.[18]

The sea has an important role to play in the ritual while the groom is thus celebrating his virility.

> When the door is unlocked the first visitors are the mothers of the bride and the bridegroom, come solely for the purpose of examining the sheets. If the evidence is satisfactory the bed linen is taken to the sea for ritual washing, a long process involving spells and incantations. But woe betide the bride whose marriage bed is unstained. The bridegroom's mother can go straight to the _despotis_ and demand that the marriage be annulled.(ibid.)

In birth, the sea is where the lying-in sheets are washed and the afterbirth disposed of. And it is the sea which claims so many of their dead. The crippled divers form a presence throughout the book. The scene where old Stamatis the diver is talking of the great divers of the past finishes with the question:

> What happened to them all?
> They are dead. All dead. Under the sea or the sand...[19]

Clift earlier presented the picture of the divers and their attachment to the sea even after it has crippled them.

> The crippled men never walk in pairs. That is the first thing you notice. They wrench their ways alone among the streets and coffee tables by the sea or limp stubbornly between the strong. There is something queer and furtive and angry in this avoidance of the other crippled men, something almost of jealousy, as if in the terrible equal marks of suffering there lies an unbearable resented proof of an equal intimacy with that cruel and passionate mistress who has rejected them but holds them yet. _I Thalassa!_ The sea! The sea![19a]

The lot of women on Kalymnos is detailed and

explained by description, relating to their friends and comparing with the Johnstons' own domestic relations. Clift draws conclusions from the specific to the general and shows a sympathy with and understanding of these women and their particular burdens. It is a squabble between Yanni and Sevasti after Sevasti has asked Yanni to fetch some water for the family picnic that raises the question. Yanni is outraged. Clift gives some perspective to the argument by pointing out that he would have fetched the water had she, Clift, asked him. That of course is different.

> For here we are confronted with something far more serious and meaningful than the mere pricking of Yanni's sense of dignity. Fetching water is a woman's work. Indeed, anything that involves the carrying of a burden is woman's work, whether it is stumbling down the mountain under a hundredweight of gorse for the bread ovens or carrying the roped sea chest to the departing sponge boat.
>
> Kalymnian men, like old Etonians, do not carry parcels. They swing key chains. They play with tasselled strings of beads or shells. Sometimes they twirl a carnation between their fingers or carry it, gipsy-fashion, in their strong white teeth. Anything more burdensome is carried by their wives or sisters or mothers or daughters, who plod several paces behind, if not on the opposite side of the road.[20]

Clift relates the situation to her family and thus to the personal experience of the presumed English language reader by telling of George's embarrassment when an arthritic aged lady is berated by a bus driver for getting up too slowly to offer George her seat; of Yanni's embarrassment when he comes upon George washing up or bathing the children; of uneasiness, forced jokes and the

eyes turned away from the degradation. The interesting story of an American girl married to a modern Americanised, liberated Greek man who nevertheless finds herself trapped in the old pattern, fetching for her husband, to her own amazement. Clift does not leave it at apt comparisons and illustrations, she digs deeper, seeking the origins of the behaviour and the discrimination. To demystify is to understand and may well be the way to change.

> Kalymnos is probably one of the few surviving islands where one can see the worn threads of the old pattern, older than mainland Greece, in its essentials older than recorded history, going back to a misty time when masculine subjugation to an all-powerful Earth Mother led to masculine revolt and the goddess was overthrown. Then, because the men were still afraid, it was necessary to enslave the goddess, to deride her, to bolster up the new disquiet of freedom by boasts and jeers and laughter.
> These dark atavistic currents still seem to swirl through the everyday life of Kalymnos.[20]

Clift is writing about Kalymnos but at the same time, she is explaining to the sensitive reader the reasons for male chauvinism and prejudice in Greece and, by inference, in the modern world generally. Clift gives both sides of the argument. She describes a family with children and how the girls wait on the son who is

> ...sprawled like a young lord with his legs stretched beneath the table, watching the women scurry to serve him.[21]

This is not a one-sided presentation. The picture of the 'young lord' being waited on is balanced by the evocation of the uncertain future that awaits the male who must face

danger so that his sisters can be comfortably married:

> ...it will be he who will go to the ends of the earth and face dangers and disasters and humiliations he does not dream of yet so that his sisters can sit among the growing vines and fig trees on a fine spring morning and count up their prika.

By conveying the importance of the prika, or dowry, and the male's pride in providing for his sisters, Clift is able to give a wide picture of female/male relationships, drawing from her experiences on this small island.

In Mermaid Singing Clift found her voices. The Charmian Clift persona which evolved and presented itself in this work was essentially that which would find its most effective vehicle in the essays. Clift's concern for humanity; her feeling for classicism; her understanding of people; the style and form that would make 'foreign' ways and non-Australian mores acceptable to Australian readers are all, not only evident in Mermaid Singing, but fully developed. Her way of generalising from the particular in examining human relationships, clearly demonstrated here, would be crucial in the Charmian Clift Phenomenon. It was to be another ten years before the seeds sown here were to reach full flower in the essays, but the themes, the commitment, the understanding, the style and the Charmian Clift persona are all present in Mermaid Singing.

NOTES

1. T.S. Eliot, The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock.
2. MS p.68. cf. Kinnane, pp.137 et seq.
3. Tracy, D.H. Lawrence... pp.10-13.
4. MS, p.9.
5. p.11. The 'Johnston house' on Kalymnos is still there, still spindly and yellow, but now it too is a coffee-house with tables and chairs on the footpath. GT 1988.
6. MS, p.13.
7. p. 28.
8. In Kalymnos in 1988 I tried to track down Yanni Tsakrios, whose return to Kalymnos was the subject of the essay. I was able with some difficulty to find his daughter, surrounded by children in a little house near the port. She told me, through an interpreter, that Yanni had indeed returned to Kalymnos and then, she thought, gone back to Australia. GT.
9. MS, pp.65-6.
10. pp.43 et seq.
11. pp.47-8.
11a. pp.180-4.12. p.194-5.
13. Kinnane, p.72.
14. The Gleam, 1937.
15. MS, p.56.
16. C.M. Bowra, Classical Greece, (Time-Life International, [Nederland], 1966).
17. MS,pp.86-7.
18. pp.62-3.
19. p.83.
19a. p.25.
20. pp.52-3.
21. pp.66.

IX. L O T U S E A T E R S

> A housewife is a housewife wherever she is--in the biggest city of the world or on a small Greek Island. There is no escape. She must move always to the dreary recurring decimal of her rites.[1]

Charmian Clift dedicated her personal experience book about Hydra, Peel me a Lotus, to her husband. George Johnston, in turn, inscribed his novel, The Far Road, 'for Charmian,in earnest'. Together, they had dedicated their joint novel, The Sponge Divers, 'For the Kalymnians'.

After the year on Kalymnos and the completion of The Sponge Divers, the family made the move to Hydra, a goal they had been working and hoping for since London, and one made possible by the windfall of $850 American from the sale of a Johnston short story, The Astypalaian Knife. This was not without irony since Johnston's English publishers Higham had considered the story 'not worth showing to anybody'.[2]

The period of time covered by the events in Peel me a Lotus coincides with a time of great strain on their marriage. Garry Kinnane and their son Martin, however, point to the fact that despite all the fighting, each was always an important stimulus to the other and that through

all the fighting, which was evidently often very public and bitter on Hydra, the two remained strongly attached physically, emotionally, psychologically and above all, creatively.[3]

The preceding personal experience book, Mermaid Singing, had vividly reflected the freshness and innocence of the situation Clift found herself in. She mastered the art of communicative writing as, by inserting herself into the text in the form of an attractive persona, she exploited the potential of the travel book genre. There were no other expatriates on Kalymnos and the island itself had not been 'discovered' by the tourist trade. The family's experiences on Kalymnos were new and exciting and Clift's writing and involvement conveyed this excitement to the reader. Despite the wistfully pessimistic tone of the quotation from 'Prufrock' that begins Mermaid Singing, it is basically an optimistic book. This has a lot to do with the subjective nature of Clift's style which gives the reader the feeling of sharing in her own wonder and joy in participating in such things as the Greek baptism. In addition, the local characters have, in the main, a simplicity, naivety and faith, and the incidents recounted have an untainted innocence. The Johnstons are depicted as the only outside observers of this interesting and simple community. The optimism is summed up in the ending of Mermaid Singing.

Not yet...not for a moment. If I stay for a moment,

> only a moment, perhaps I might hear it too--that one rare mermaid singing.[4]

It was inevitable that Peel me a Lotus would be different in character from its predecessor. The family circumstances were different and Clift was about to give birth to a child in a foreign country, without a doctor or hospital or any of the drugs and assistance normally expected in a western country in the 1950's. This represented a real adventure in itself. The imminence of the birth is given as the reason for the purchase of 'the house by the well', a purchase which is very important to the story. Buying, refurbishing, moving in and coming to terms with the house form a focus for much of Peel me a Lotus. The unborn child is a character in the book. Throughout her 'personal experience' books and many of the essays written for 'The Herald', Clift's family is important and integral to the narrative. By exploiting her own family relationships she builds the persona of the wife and mother and gives a verisimilitude to the narrative. Here the unborn baby is already part of the action, making its presence felt as the deal to buy the house is being consummated at the notary's table. The reference is sympathetic and homely:

> ...sitting very upright in the chair so that my old duffel-coat hung straight from my shoulders and disguised slightly the sudden alarming activity that was going on under it...[5]

Only a 'westerner' would attempt to hide her

pregnancy and the unborn baby's activity in this manner. A Greek woman would draw as much attention as possible to her condition. The references to 'sitting very upright' and 'alarming activity' would remind mothers of how they coped with pregnancy and forge a link with much of the readership. Such things were not usually mentioned in stories or 'travel books' at that time. Their presence gives a slightly daring quality to the narrative. The 'old duffel-coat' enlists sympathy and provides a nostalgic reference for an audience of approximately Clift's age.

Peel me a Lotus begins on a fine optimistic note:

> Today we bought the house by the well.

The Johnstons have never before actually owned a dwelling. Buying this house represents a real commitment: to each other, to the family and to living in Greece. It is a sign that they feel the experiment is over. They can live as writers.

The precarious economic position of the Johnston family in their 'Greek experiment' as they continue to try to support themselves on their income as full-time writers is emphasised early in the purchase of the house. Clift, chatting personally to an international reader, explains what it all means. There is an ironic twist with the rate of exchange on that particular morning.

> All the same, it would have been too much to expect that we should catch fortune's tide at the full: the rate of exchange on the gold pound was higher this morning than it has been for months, so that the house actually cost four hundred and ninety-three

> pounds ten shillings in English paper money, or six hundred and twenty Australian pounds, or about thirteen hundred dollars.[6]

Clift continues, translating the meaning into human values, particularly those of 'motherhood'. She thus creates a bond between the presumably comfortably ensconced non-Greek reader and this expatriate mother, providing a vicarious and unusual adventure. The childbirth and the caique in the one breath make at once an identifiable yet exotic combination.

> There it went! Our last little bit of capital, our going-back-to-civilization money, our reserve against children's illnesses, tonsils or appendix operations, dental disasters -- or that never-mentioned contingency that might arise if all does not go well at the birth of this new baby of mine within the next few weeks and I have to be carted off dramatically to Athens in a caique. (ibid)

The mention of 'civilization' in this way is ironic. The Johnstons, Charmian in particular, had come to Greece for the 'civilization', which they identified as ancient culture, yet she implies that 'civilization' is back home where there are modern facilities and to which they could escape if things did not work out..

Clift's prose style in the following passage matches the flamboyant importance of the occasion when she gives Johnston centre-stage for the scene of the actual purchase.

> I must say George flung down the money with quite an air, just as if it was truly one hundred and twenty glittering golden sovereigns he was scattering across the notary public's table.[5]

She goes on to explain the full significance of the need to pay in golden sovereigns or their equivalent, once again in human terms: 'there is no other money they really trust'. She even seems wistful that they did not have to, as Creon foreshadowed, go from house to house buying up actual sovereigns for the purchase.

In an exotic setting, Clift renders experience accessible by reference to things that are familiar. The characters and personal appearance of the local participants in the house-buying scene are delineated along with their history and explanations of their motivation. The main local character in the house-buying scene is the Notary Public, Creon. His 'Edwardian and hansom-cabbish' English is explained.

> Creon learned his English at Robert College in Constantinople early in the century, and until we came to the island last year he hadn't used a word of it since 1911, so that everything he says has a sort of jaunty formality, very Edwardian and hansom-cabbish, like his clipped moustache and his neat grizzled coiffure and his shabby but beautifully brushed overcoat with its velvet collar and the little sprig of hyacinth in the lapel.[7]

Clift leads into Creon's story through the curious mysterious stories that he himself relates of his past, stories 'with a strange faint perfume of pomade about them'. His 'is a romantic saga', with, as Clift puts it, 'a history with that same illusive fairy-tale charm of unreality'.[7] His rise to great wealth is depicted, as he travelled the world, then his return to the island and the

belief that his wife has: 'taken recourse to the only diversion possible to a bored and pretty young matron'. Making use herself of an appropriately archaic language, she describes the scene in which the 'pretty young matron' is escorted by a liveried boat crew to the private yacht to be removed from the island. Then follows the description of Creon's gradual financial ruin, as he fights through 'every court in Europe and America' trying to avoid paying his wife an allowance. He is finally 'finished off' by the Second World War.

Even though the island of Hydra has no background of classical myth, Clift manages, by using the classic names of Creon and Socrates[8], to inject an ironic significance into domestic events as both characters in the small community perform humble but important tasks which are in accord with the behaviour of the illustrious ancients from whom their names derive. The modern Creon is an arbiter who sees that justice is done. The modern Socrates strives for the good of others without apparent thought of gain for himself.

The strange and likeable character of this modern Socrates is vividly depicted. The name, the repetition of the name, the choice of words such as 'skitters', 'panting' and the language generally, all combine to present a clear picture of him.

> Socrates, small, plump, bald, and beaming, in some ways belongs to the whole town, as the whole town belongs to Socrates.[9]

As an orphan refugee, he also mirrors much of the history of Hydra and its importance as a place of refuge for travellers.

> And it is still Socrates who decks the town for great and small occasions, and still Socrates who meets the boats, and still Socrates who skitters along the waterfront and up and down the steep steps and narrow lanes of the town from morning until night, with anxious tourists panting at his heels.[7]

These characters appear throughout the book, often linking the action. There is no real development of them as one might expect in a novel, they are minor yet important characters, giving a local verisimilitude to the narrative.[10] Their treatment is journalistic, each character being developed just enough to enable the reader to immediately recognize them and know where they are placed.

The whole community seems to join in the pleasure and the importance of the occasion of the purchase of 'the house by the well'. In Greek there is a special phrase which means 'Congratulations on your acquisition!' and which applies specifically to acquiring a house. This phrase, '<u>Kalo riziko!</u>', is offered by the main parties of the deal and taken up by all who hear the news. Clift puts the purchase into perspective for herself and the reader with her apparently heartfelt statement:

> There has been too much already of rented houses. I would like at least one of my children to be born in its own home...[7]

There are also Greek ritualistic overtones to Clift's desire to have her child born in its own home. The deal

completed, Creon intones the suggestion which becomes the leit-motif for the book:

> 'I take it that we will adjourn to Katsikas' Bar? If everyone is agreed that this is the proper procedure on this most happy and propitious occasion?'[11]

Vital to the whole book are the members of the foreign colony who pervade the narrative from this point on. Kinnane lists many of the foreigners who made up the 'expatriate colony' of Hydra, much of his information coming from an interview with Grace Edwards in 1983.

> There was David Goschen, an English poet, and his wife, Angela; a Swedish writer, Axel Jensen, and his wife, Marianne, later to have an affair with Leonard Cohen and give the title to one of his better-known songs ('Farewell Marianne'); an American writer, Gill Schwartz, and his wife, Loetitia; and, to round off this little United Nations of Expatriates, a striking-looking French roue-cum-painter called Jean-Claude Maurice, in patched jeans and wearing one gold ear-ring...[12]

They are developed quite differently from the Greek characters who have an exotic quaintness about them. Clift introduces 'a painter named Henry Trevenna and his wife Ursula'. These two are a clear presentation of Sidney Nolan and his wife Cynthia.[13]

Clift's immense respect and apparent strong continuing friendship with Nolan colour her depiction of the character. His presence in the book is as a form of guru who advises struggling artists to 'Fly!'. This advice appears first in the book in reply to Sean, an expatriate writer on Hydra, who is pocketing another rejection slip and saying 'with a grin of gentle self-derision':

> 'Ah well...and sometimes you think you can fly.'
> 'Fly,then!' says Henry. 'Bloody well soar, why don't you?'[14]

The figure of Nolan himself, with his advice and his philosophy of life, is a leit-motif not just in this book but in other writings of Clift and in the Johnstons' life.[15]

According to Brian Adams, Nolan's (authorised) biographer, the idea of the Nolans' coming to Hydra came from the Johnstons.

> During this time of working, travelling and career development, the Nolans met the Australian author and journalist George Johnston and his wife Charmian Clift, who was also a writer...George and Charmian (had) recently returned from Greece, bringing with them a stack of photographs that Nolan found exciting. Although they were in black and white, Nolan could appreciate the clarity of light in the Greek Islands; and the dazzling whitewashed houses looked fascinating as subjects to paint. George Johnston had come to the conclusion that he smoked and drank too much in London, and had to spend too much time earning money as a journalist to pay the bills instead of getting on with writing novels. He suggested the Nolans might like to join them later in the year on Hydra where he, Charmian and their children were going to live far away from the pressures of England, to work in congenial surroundings at a fraction of the cost of London.[16]

Although it is a little hard to tie in the time-scale of this anecdote with the Johnstons' departure and year on Kalymnos, it does seem that the Johnston invitation was important in bringing the Nolans to Hydra.

The Frenchman Jean-Claude Maurice is clearly recognisable as Jacques in Peel me a Lotus. He is important in the narrative and as a main topic of gossip

for the other characters and the people of Hydra generally. As Kinnane points out, Maurice also provided the basis for the character Achilles Mouliet in Johnston's Closer to the Sun.[17] In Peel me a Lotus, Clift is scornfully dismissive of the Frenchman, summing him up in a passage also quoted by Kinnane.

> Not Dionysos after all, the fleet, the free, the beautiful, the ever-young - but only a little curly dog in season, whose imperative it is to sniff after any and every lady dog.[18]

In Closer to the Sun Johnston's treatment is, as Kinnane says, intense, as he 'drew on his own feelings about Clift's affair with Jean-Claude Maurice'.[17] The Frenchman turns up again in Clean Straw for Nothing, the book Clift dreaded. This time Johnston uses the 'Clift' name Jacques, and,

> ...in that novel Jacques insists that he has not slept with Cressida, and Meredith's jealousy makes him seem small-minded and unnecessarily distrusting of Cressida.[17]

Clift uses the character as a source of humour. He is a construct that brings Greek and foreigner together to talk of his shameful behaviour and the news or rumours of his amusing metamorphosis to respectability lead gently into the ending to the story.

The drama and interest, particularly in the early part of the book, centre on the weeks preceding and including the birth of the Johnstons' baby who will be given the significant Greek name of Jason. It was Jason,

in Classical Greek mythology, who led the expedition to fetch the Golden Fleece and, ironically, was indirectly responsible for King Creon's death at the hand of Medea. The classical Jason died by his own hand.[8]

The feverish haste with which Creon (who is to be the godfather) urges the alterations to the house to make it habitable (from a 'western' or non-Greek point of view) is determined by the imminent arrival of young Jason. The ironical failure to reconcile Greek and Western differences is a crucial thematic element of Clift's treatment. It is explored in greater depth in her novel Honour's Mimic. The irony is emphasised by the choice of Greek name for the baby and Greek godfather who strives to create a non-Greek ambiance for his expected godchild. The later episode with Mrs. Knip, Katherine and Toby will further exploit this theme with a humorously effective reductio ad absurdum.[19]

There is something daring for the times about the whole healthy, open account of the pregnancy and the 'lying-in'. The way Martin and Shane refer to the expected baby as 'B' must have seemed frank and very welcome in the 'stifling fifties'.

> 'And for B,' Shane murmured lovingly, patting my duffel-coat. 'And a nice little room for B.'[20]

Ursula (Cynthia Nolan) agrees with Shane:

> 'Oh yes, you might as well give him a nice little room.'

but she adds the comment: 'He's committed too.'

This initiates a soul-searching by Clift in which she seems to approach despair, frankly revealing what seem to be her innermost fears. The pessimism is, as so often happens in this book, nicely contrasted with a scene of optimism and happiness, though there is irony in the sardonic summing-up.

> Had one really intended to commit oneself so irrevocably? After eighteen months of brave chittering on the subject of the fine free independent life, I stood at the back of Nick Katsikas' grocery store with my belly very great with a new responsibility and my mouth gone dry with surprise and terror.
>
> George, with one child tugging at his hand and the other at his trouser leg, was buying beakers of wine for everyone in the shop. He looked flushed, excited, happy. There he was, and there was I, and there were the children, two and eight-ninths of them, Jolly Good Fellows all. Committed.(ibid.)

In the above passage the reader is given a happy domestic picture. There is however a distinct underpinning of mild terror. In the context of the 1950's, buying wine 'for everyone in the shop' is a foreign exotic touch, unimaginable in Australia where such a thing would not happen and would be illegal if attempted. The phrase 'beakers of wine' has a classical, romantic flavour, a shy echo of Keats, alluding to 'the deep south' and to a history connected with wine and its mysteries. The untainted happiness of George is fleeting and contrasts strongly with his depiction later in the book. The passage contains a frankness, a questioning of purpose and a self-consciousness which were all to become hallmarks of

the style of the later essays. Keats was to be with Clift right to the end in her reported suicide note. The pithy, ambiguous and ironically biting ending, 'Jolly Good Fellows all. Committed.' continues Cynthia Nolan's comment and brings the episode into focus from Clift's and the reader's point of view.

In a letter to Pat Flower, quoted in full by Kinnane, Cynthia Nolan writes of Clift and her pregnancy on Hydra.

> As to the Johnstons. Charm is admirable truly. As her hour approaches I think some or most of the bitterness and frustration and anguish have gone. She swings along, shoulders back, great smile working, although I know she must be deadly tired, by now. I've seen thousands of pregnant women, and strong ones who delighted to be bearing a baby, but I can't remember one who bore herself with such verve, with such an air.

'The bitterness and frustration and anguish' are mentioned as having largely gone but they must have been there in Clift and been apparent. These feelings surface in the book, differentiating it from Mermaid Singing. Cynthia Nolan goes on to write of Clift's desire to fit in with 'the Greek way of life' and sums up the problem as she sees it:

> ... but we, want to never so much, can't act natural within another culture.[21]

Clift made it clear in Mermaid Singing that it was because of the children that the Johnstons were able to be accepted into the life of a Greek island. And now it is Clift's pregnancy that gives them entry into Hydran society. Through passages such as the following the reader

is made aware of the bond between women and the cross-cultural effects of the pregnancy. One is nevertheless always conscious of the differentness of the culture and of the fact that the Johnston family and the rest of the foreign colony are truly ex-patriates.

> And all the women stopped in their doorways to watch us pass.
> 'When will it be, Kyria?' Archonda the sempstress came into the lane to pat my belly inquisitively.
> 'Three weeks -- four -- five. God knows, not I.'
> 'Good freedom, lady.' The woman (sic) called the wish formally, their expert eyes appraising the curve of my coat. Old Kyria Kali -- Mrs. Good -- whom Creon says was the local procuress in the wild old days when the port was wealthy, threw up her hands and shrieked in startled revelation.
> 'Mother of God! Is it this skinny one in trousers who is having the child then? Panaygia mou! I thought it was this other - the Espanola!
> Sean let out a shout of laughter as the old woman grabbed Lola and began to prod her professionally.
> 'These bloody Greeks!' Lola muttered indignantly, struggling to free herself. Sean hooted. Kyria Kali squeezed and kneaded. Lola turned, angrily straightening her clothing...[22]

In the 1950's, in Australia, pregnant women of the middle class (which class would include most of the prospective female readers of the book) normally hid their pregnancy as long as possible behind draped garments, and would have found a scene such as the above beyond imagining. Mediterranean women accentuated their 'condition'. Clift's behaviour, as the pregnant woman in this and other scenes, blends the two cultures, though she is always the sympathetic expatriate, even if her friend Lola, in this exchange at least, comes off badly. She portrays scenes such as this in an acceptable and

believable way. This is achieved by having herself as a participant in the scene and as a 'butt' of the humour. Clift is "the skinny one in trousers". By inserting herself into the scene she gives an authenticity, a verisimilitude.[23]

Clift is obviously not trying to masquerade as a Greek as might have been implied by Cynthia Nolan's remarks. The little asides to situations, and the ironic comments, show just how aware Clift is of her otherness.

> In the rooms where we live while we get our house in order we have no other heating than a three-legged tin filled with charcoal embers -- very Greek.[24]

Far from choosing 'the Greek way', most of the expatriates are delighted to have some creature comforts. Clift describes Cynthia Nolan's delight when the Nolans are loaned 'a wonderful, twenty-room mansion' by a wealthy Greek who is an admirer of Nolan's paintings.[25] Nolan, quite without pretension, of course accepts.

> I think that Ursula can't quite believe her luck yet. A bathroom again! Tiled stoves and carpets! A real studio for Henry! After all the years of stumbling in Henry's wake through an endless succession of shoddy furnished flats, European hotel rooms, cheap <u>pensions</u>, and the guest-rooms of friends, it must seem incredible luxury. (ibid)

The young American couple who do try to adopt the foreign culture and live in what they conceive to be Greek-style are an object of fun to Clift and to the reader. They are memorable minor characters and the wife, Katharine's, progress, or rather, lack of progress, in

becoming Greek is well documented. Their ludicrously sincere efforts to be natural show up the difficulty of what all the expatriates are attempting.

> They are Toby and Katharine Nichols, both of them American by birth, European by education, and Greek by choice. At least, Toby is Greek by choice. Of Katharine I am not so sure...[26]

Though Clift does make fun of them it is gentle and sympathetic; she always sides with the wife trying so hard to fit in with her husband's 'dream'.

> (Katharine's) hair is braided neatly into two long plaits which hang down her back under a white scarf tied correctly in the old fashion of the island, still seen on very elderly women or occasionally on shepherds' wives who have not yet learned modern ways...
> (Toby speaks Greek) fluently, if rather nervously, and appears to be a little exasperated because Creon refuses to understand him and insists on speaking English...(Toby has) an enormous Greek-style moustache that has something of the same party disguise effect as Katharine's head-scarves and aprons. Toby affects cheap fishermen's trousers and jerseys, shepherd's boots soled with old motor tyres, and carries an outsize <u>kombolloi</u> of amber beads. (ibid)

This little cameo furthers the narrative in the traditional way that the clown or fool, as in Shakespeare, mirrors and exaggerates the behaviour of the main characters and by his own excesses shows the foolishness of their actions. 'Toby' is a traditional name for a clown. There is a tense though poignant scene when the Johnstons visit this couple for tea and Katharine struggles to light the Greek fire.

> (it was) a recalcitrant charcoal fire that was smoking furiously under the white hood of the stove recess. Clouds of smoke billowed through the kitchen,

> the air stank of kerosene, and Katharine's fine, sensitive face was clownishly daubed with charcoal dust.[27]

The clear description underscores the irony of the situation which is concluded in typical Clift fashion.

> It struck me as curious that behind the charcoal grate there stood a beautiful brand-new Buta gas cooking-range, a splendid thing of shining white enamel and scarlet taps that made me feel quite sick with envy...
>
> Such faithful attention to the simple details proper to the simple life must be based on the solid plinth of an adequate private income. (ibid)

Clift is an expatriate who has not lost sight of her own roots. Her reactions and feelings in this alien situation can be sympathised with by non-expatriate 'westerners' sharing her experiences. Humour and insight are provided by the mother of Katharine who comes to the island for a visit.

> Katharine's mother has arrived, a short, stout, formidable woman of healthy middle-age, with round, black inquisitive eyes and the high, precise voice of one accustomed to addressing committee meetings.[28]

Apparently the mother, Mrs. Knip, has come to the island to see that Katharine, as she puts it, 'comes to her senses' and to persuade Toby to return to America and take up a University post. While she is on the island she sets about 'educating' the islanders and changing everybody, including the expatriates, to her way of thinking. Clift's description of Mrs. Knip is humorous and she uses this alien figure to illustrate the immense differences between 'Greek' and 'western' here on the island.

She appears on the waterfront at precisely eleven-

> thirty each morning in something of the manner of an anthropologist or lady missionary, tightly corseted under her best dress of uncrushable nylon, wearing a large straw hat, new espadrilles, and carrying a Japanese parasol. The villagers are very properly terrified of her, for although she has not a single word of Greek she manages to convey her meaning quite distinctly. (ibid)

The satire is heavy and it is achieved by the precise detail of the inappropriate dress and the careful use of language. It is sustained through the passage, beginning with the use of the mock-heroic 'appears', having the precise time 'each morning', using the telling and interesting reference to 'anthropologist or lady missionary' and giving the clear picture of a woman 'tightly corseted under her best dress...' Clift presents this subjective picture in an apparently objective descriptive manner, giving every phrase an ironic touch. Her function in the plot may well be to act as an 'alter ego' for Clift and thus disguise her own thoughts about the expatriates and their life.

Mrs. Knip questions everything and causes the residents of the island to do their own self-questioning. Having decided that the island is 'de-moralising, she finds a ready ally in Creon, who exclaims: 'Bums and perverts, madam! Hoboes!' She prefers to think that the rather aimless young Americans to whom Creon is referring are merely 'misdirected'. She dismisses all art in one tirade, and has her daughter in hysterical tears of frustration at her public humiliation. Clift makes most

effective use of Mrs. Knip with the question she asks at the end of the chapter where she has been correcting everything and everybody. It is a carefully built-up scene which has Johnston and Clift in the black slime of their all-important cistern fifteen feet below their kitchen. The cistern has run dry and Mrs. Knip is capably holding the other end of the rope knotted around Clift's shoulders. Mrs. Knip's final telling question is apposite.

> 'Shit!' said George briefly as he dropped the flashlight into the mud and plunged us both into impenetrable blackness. Mrs. Knip's pudgy face appeared in the circle of the shaft, high high above us, very small and distinct as seen through the wrong end of a telescope. Her voice came down in a series of reverberating pings that followed each other in a rising inflexion of wonder:
>
> 'But what I want to know is what are you doing it <u>for?</u>'[29]

The question is given more point, coming from Mrs. Knip whom Clift has ridiculed for her bourgeois insensitivity. She represents all they have tried to escape from. It is by now of course the question the Johnstons are asking themselves. As Kinnane points out, Johnston in <u>Clean Straw for Nothing</u> has Mark Meredith ask 'Mrs Knip's question', 'What are you doing it for?' Clift depicts her husband at this time as close to despair. She puts the reason down as a combination of: 'heat, waterlessness, the decadents, and Mrs. Knip'. Johnston is threatening to sell up and go back to London.

> From being a gregarious, warm-hearted, talkative, generous, and romantic fellow he has become suspicious, moody, unfriendly, irritable, and despairing. His work too is causing him concern. Nothing

> seems to go right with it, although he works harder than ever, patiently exploring every avenue, every corridor of possibility that might lead to some sort of security...or is it an escape now that he is working for?[30]

Ruth Park, who, with D'Arcy Niland, was close to the Johnstons during the 'High Valley' Sydney years of the late '40s, looked back in 1989 to this period in Hydra and the problems in the Johnston marriage. She saw the problems beginning at that time and she gives an outsider's picture of what was happening in Hydra through the eyes of their mutual friend, Colin Simpson.

> In later years, when I heard the sad stories from England and Greece, I wondered about those parties and the fatal hospitality that contributed more and more to the Johnstons' (and particularly Charmian's) incredibly rapid slide into poor health, alcoholism and emotional chaos. We can never truly tell what happens inside a marriage, but it seems every crisis within that marriage was met the same way. Colin Simpson, a nice civilised man who visited the couple on Hydra while researching one of his travel books, told me: "It was embarrassing, unbearable. Vile quarrels and then a booze-up. Even though they were totally broke they bought grog instead of groceries and invited strangers to share it..."[31]

If Park, and through her, Simpson, are reliable in this account, then Clift's persona was well established. She deals with the problems in the passage above as a concerned wife, worried about her husband and bravely trying to cope. The other expatriates have now become 'the decadents'. In Clift's words, the 'decadents' and their word games 'inflame George to a white-heat of fury.' She, herself, finds comfort in the children and maintains her contact with the reader as she does with the Greek

community, through them at this time of despair.

> The children are blissfully unaware of the significance of the cooking-pot. Every day they shoot up as if they have been watered over-night. Beautiful, wild young things they are, and beautiful too the fat brown baby who laughs now and clutches handfuls of air and wonderingly discovers his own waving fingers. They weigh upon my heart like lead, like chains, like three strong anchors bedded deep in the reality from which I can never escape--not even into despair.[32]

This is a profoundly sad passage. Clift, apparently desperate, is making a 'father confessor' of her book. This relates to the elements of essay writing dealt with in the introductory chapters. She has extended the travel book genre to include deep personal confession. The strongly maternal descriptions of the innocent children are contrasted with the wifely despair at George's misery. Clift muses that her husband is thinking of escape and states that it is only the children keeping her from doing likewise. The Camusian theme, 'There is no escape', was often exploited and explored by Clift. Honour's Mimic deals with this same theme. From early in Peel me a Lotus Clift has considered the possibility of finding escape on this island and, swinging from optimism to pessimism, the theme moves to the possibility of escape from this island.

> But would we be left alone to do it? (she had said) Was there really any room in the world for people who did not fit neatly into the filing system?[33]

The narrative device of Mrs. Knip gives the would-be escapists at least a chance to explain or try to justify

their position. Clift makes of her an apologist for modern western 'civilization', providing the ironic title of the book and illuminating the theme of the quest for paradise. In an exchange with her son-in-law, Mrs Knip says:

> 'It is not my business to interfere, Toby, but if you and Katharine want to eat lotus I suggest that the only place you are likely to find any is right back home.
>
> Toby snorted angrily. 'Yes, I know. Only the tenderest buds, deep-frozen, in goddam p-p-plastic packs and ten different mouth-watering flavours!'
>
> 'Can't you understand, Mother,' Katharine cried, 'that we don't <u>want</u> all that? That we hate it, and won't belong to it? That we mean to live our lives in truth and simplicity, free from all that terrible slavery to machines and gadgets? That we <u>must</u> find our own paths?'
>
> 'Mind you don't stumble then, miss, said Mrs. Knip slyly...[34]

This dialogue was written over thirty years ago, at about the beginning of 'The Age of Aquarius'. Clift is making accessible ideas which had much currency in the Western world. The generation conflict and the plastic machine-ridden soul-less society from which there must be an escape are themes which will be well developed in the essays. The innocence of the young couple provides an interest in itself and invites condescension. They are playing at what the Johnstons are doing in earnest. Mrs. Knip plays the 'devil's advocate' while Clift is narrator, commentator and deeply involved participant. The Johnstons seem to be in an untenable situation from which there is no escape. The ridiculous Mrs. Knip talks a lot of sense. The idealistic Toby and Katharine are shown to the reader

to be very naive. This is not just a dialectic, there is no escape.

> But there are times when I begin to think that Mrs. Knip is right.(says Clift) The atmosphere <u>is</u> bad. (ibid.)

There is a shift now in the structure of the narrative. The simple sentence 'The atmosphere <u>is</u> bad' provides the link. The changes in George, the changes in their life are mirrored by a change in style as Clift describes the horrific, Gothic aspects of life on the island. She exploits many of the aspects of Gothic literature.[35] The rhetoric of fantasy, the grotesque characters, the dead baby and the metaphor of the swollen toad, the deformed dwarf, the cats, the flies, the sexual, moral and physical degradation, the distortion; all these aspects combine into a horrific scene. The Gothic aspect is furthered as the narrator is a woman who feels alone and isolated in a small community to which she doesn't feel she belongs but where she is constrained to remain. The specific Greekness of the scene is stressed by the image of the woman shrieking 'among the windburnt geraniums with the howling mouth of a Greek mask'. Clift presents an amazing succession of frightful images of horror, degradation and unhealthiness. There is no optimism here. The conglomeration is Kafkaesque.

> Everything is changed, as though I am looking at the island in a distorting mirror, or as if the moon has begun to shine on us with her other face.
> The old woman sweeping the church doorstep looks up at me as I pass, and her eyes are white with

> trachoma. Two adolescent louts are teasing the dwarf girl and she is laughing--why did I never notice before that she has two sets of teeth? All the Bosch people have crawled out from their dark corners and are limping and hopping and gibbering in the sweltering sun: the face in the window has a beak like a parrot, the baby dead of malnutrition is a swollen toad, a woman shrieks among the windburnt geraniums with the howling mouth of a Greek mask--gone mad, they say, with waiting for her man to return from the sea--the hand that measures out a mound of glistening green grapes is not a hand at all, but a sort of double-hooked claw covered with scabs. Eyes are furtive, mouths are leering, bodies are swollen and misshapen. On the butcher's slab a skinned bull's head all covered with flies slides slowly towards me in a mess of slippery scarlet. Four boys with poles and hooks are fishing cruelly for birds on the hill above the Down School. The flyblown carcase of a dead cat is rotting in Kyria Spirathoula's hen run, and every lane and rooftop and alley is aswarm with live ones--huge, slinking, predatory and lust-haunted brutes all torn and mangy and scarred. In a dark archway a young sailor snickers and his old companion, dressed expensively in yachting clothes, lurches back into the shadows....[36]

The 'Bosch' reference underlines Clift's cultural awareness. As she often has done, she is seeing this scene through the lens of literature and she produces the effect of overwhelming horror by piling image upon ghastly image. Here is readily accessible symbolism of degradation with the animal world emphasising the degradation of the human. The scene is now set for the arrival of the film company.

The pace of the book increases towards the end, mirroring the action. The characters are all known, islanders and expatriates alike. They have been presented in the joys of childbirth, in their daily routine and in

their degradation which has been brought on as much by the lack of water as by the constraints of living so close together and by their character. The strain will not be relieved until the rains come.

Into this community comes the ultimate intrusion, a big budget American film company. It is an apocalyptic invasion and is depicted dramatically. Little scenes, vignettes, are presented in film-like fashion as the invasion takes over the island. The situation is exploited by Clift to examine the values of the expatriates, the islanders and western civilization. Johnston and Clift had heard two fat little men announcing 'We'll sure take this little island apart! We sure will!' and had been puzzled by this. Socrates, mad with excitement, announces the imminent arrival of the film company in terms of what it means to him and his island.

> 'Dollaria, Kyrios Giorgios!' Socrates said breathlessly. 'Lots of dollaria!' He erupted into giggles, his hand making demented circles over his heaving belly.

Clift constructs a vignette around the pertinent expression 'dollaria'. Johnston tries to talk reason to Socrates, but the thought of the dollaria is just too overwhelming.

> 'But Socrates, you bloody idiot, there isn't any water!'
> 'Then pirasi! God won't forget this island. He'll send a little bit of rain, you see. It's going to rain dollaria...'[37]

There is irony in having a character named

'Socrates' being called a 'bloody idiot'. The irony continues in the assurance that God will bring the rain to facilitate the happening of this modern miracle. There is an apt tying together of these ideas in Socrates' exclamation, 'It's going to rain dollaria'. He repeats the word 'dollaria' eight times, as his excitement builds. The effect is climactic. The word 'dollaria' is then taken up by the locals who see this visitation as a dream come true.

By means of an extended metaphor Clift compares the arrival of the film company with the invasion of an army. The irony of the situation is emphasised by the picture of the landing barges 'nosing in' to the moorings where the wine boats were blessed a week before. Socrates has expressed his simple faith in God with regard to making it rain. When an aristocratic lady reiterates this faith and sympathises with a man from the film company about the lack of water, he arrogantly announces that they don't need God to bring rain, they are bringing in water tankers.[38] The materialism of western society and the irrelevance to this society of spiritual values is thus illuminated.

The same arrogance towards aesthetic and social values is vividly depicted. Important people ride jeeps or strut through the town issuing bizarre orders: 'Ruin that house!', 'Antique that store!', 'Paint that caique!'

Tradition is swept aside. One is given the impression of the island being completely taken over as the metaphor of invasion is continued with the arrival of the camp-followers:

> 'hopeful young girls in job-lots, standardised beauties with the currently favourite "natural" look, who strike poses against ships' rigging or run gaily through the coffee tables with wide, white animated smiles and superbly bouncing breasts.'

The irony is heavy but Clift creates a gorgeous, gaudy picture with the use of descriptive words and original combinations such as 'job-lots' of girls and 'gorgeously bouncing breasts'. The irony is extended with the arrival of the 'beautiful people', 'Greece's champion diver, Greece's first violinist, Greece's most famous lyric poet' all murmur 'Isn't all this <u>awful</u>!' and the same cry is taken up by the expatriates. Sykes sneeringly refers to 'Trade goods for the natives' as he elbows his way in to the merry man who is dispensing free gin and scotch to all comers. It is an apocalyptic scene as the peace and tranquility of the island is destroyed for <u>dollaria</u>. As narrator, Clift not only comments and describes but also takes part. Her awareness of her own position and her frankness about her own attitude help the reader to become immersed in the strange new world.

> In this weird dream-world everyone slips into A Role... Somehow we have become indigenous. And even the most apparently worldly members of the film company are rather inclined to drop their forks and use their fingers if we join them--I suppose to make us feel at ease-- and to apologise in hushed voices for Spoiling Our Paradise.[39]

It is not the expatriates' paradise at all and thus their arrogance and lack of true values are linked with those of the film company which they claim to despise but which they are just as willing as the islanders to exploit. Clift's method is seen in the way she takes a small but telling detail such as the 'dropped forks' in the above quotation and uses it to illustrate the state of unreality into which the community has been plunged. She tells a story against herself as 'Queerest, and most terrifying of all, one finds oneself playing the role assigned'. Invited to a cocktail party, she passes over the only decent and suitable garment she has in the world, 'a very lovely and ridiculously extravagant cocktail skirt' and fits herself out 'in character', in old cotton pants and a clean, patched shirt. Clift and Lola, another of the expatriates, are annoyed that a 'beautiful Greek sculptress' outdoes the both of them by wearing a fossilized dog's jawbone on a black velvet ribbon. There is much humour in the cocktail party, particularly from the gross condescension of the film crowd, 'you folksing' everybody and ironically continuing the theme of how awful it all is.

Clift positions the reader to disapprove of the film company and question western values. As in Mermaid Singing, she exploits the travel genre by placing herself so unambiguously in the action. The self-criticism lessens

the feeling the reader may have that Clift is culpable, along with everyone else on the island, for exploiting the film company. The film executives are presented as mere cardboard cutouts, so ludicrously crass and shallow as to invite exploitation. The pretension of the following passage, for instance, not attributed to any individual but as a sort of 'film company' statement, removes any claims they may have had for finer treatment by those on the island.

> 'Oh, I think it's just too bad we are going to ruin it all for you...Because we will ruin it. Apres nous le deluge![40]

This statement is followed by boasting of how they 'ruined' Paris after the film they made there. The juxtaposition of Hydra and Paris reveals Clift's method of setting the film company up to appear ludicrous.

Apocalypse in the book is not left to the invaders alone. The forces of nature which have been mocked by this group that do not need God and who show no respect for anything reassert their power. In an improbable and highly dramatic coincidence, an earthquake strikes the island at the precise moment when the 'Strong Man' fires his cannon.[41]

> ('strongest man in Greece, I'll bet,' says George.) The strong man...regales the crowded quay with such feats of strength as--he swears it by the Holy Virgin--as have never been seen before.[42]

Clift's description of the strong man is detailed,

perceptive and evocative. The scene is carefully set and eventually, tension having mounted for some time, the cannon shoots flame with 'a shattering roar' and there is absolute panic as chaos ensues. Clift, the narrator, so involves the reader that there is only a gradual realisation by reader and participants together that the earthquake has struck simultaneously with the cannon's roar.

> The caiques are all leaping into the air, panes of glass are flying out of windows, even the ground seems to be slipping and sliding under one's feet. One is running before one knows one is running. Everyone is running with open panting mouths and staring eyes. The bells are all ringing, but discordantly, and in the second that one realizes why the bells are ringing, the marble spire of the monastery comes bouncing down in huge carved chunks about one's feet. Earthquake, earthquake...and we are running running running...where are the children?...where is Cassandra with the baby?...oh please please please...[42]

This is the book's climax. The earthquake has a cathartic effect on characters, reader and narrator alike. The ironic title of the book is recalled as the mood becomes gentle; perhaps there will be some 'lotus-eating'. The next paragraph exudes calm and peace, forming a distinct contrast with the Gothic evocation and the invasion of the film company.

> When we awoke this morning there were stripes of sunshine across our bed and from the streaming garden a fragrance of green oranges and wet leaves. George's fingers were dabbling cautiously in the pure pale gold that lay across the blanket.
>
> 'It's real,' he said sleepily, and turned over again.[43]

The use of the plural pronoun, the soft colours, the harmony with nature all combine to present a scene of contentment. The rain has come. The 'morning sounds' from outside are sensuous and suggest a strong pagan, Dionysian influence, increased by the fact that the dustman with his bell is named Dionyssos and that the first bells to be heard are the goat-bells, equally associated with Dionysus. In this contrived scene, Clift manipulates her audience with the effective use of the accumulation of different sounds.

> Children, donkeys, roosters, bells---goat-bells, sheep-bells, donkey-bells, church bells, even...yes, the handbell of Dionyssos the dustman... all the air swinging with bells. (ibid.)

Without destroying the calmness, she then tells the reader, in retrospect, rather than as it happened, how they had all rushed outside like maniacs into the first cloudburst.

> ...stark naked the lot of us and all shouting and singing...

This dionysian reaction to long-awaited drought-breaking rain seems satisfying and natural under the circumstances. Nature has asserted itself.

The denouement is clearly contrived, with characters making a brief final appearance, rather in the nature of a formula soap-opera. Henry and Ursula (the Nolans) turn up with the idea of buying a house 'before all the rich people snap them up'. The film company leaves in a

magnificently organised exodus in the middle of the drenching rain. The man in the baseball cap hands over to Clift a dozen jars of peanut butter, a reference to Mermaid Singing and Martin's equation of peanut butter with civilization. Johnston is talking definitely of buying a boat, a caique, and following the route of the Argo, up into the Black Sea. Lola gives an out of character and rather trite 'Hurray'. The three Swedes who had provided gentle comic relief early in the book, return, clean-shaven this time, unable to stay away 'from this island we love most well...'

Creon brings news of Jacques, the decadent, semi-naked, uninhibited Frenchman who had shocked them all. He is now evidently working in Paris, wearing a business suit and no ear-ring. Creon then reminds, or tells everyone that it is the day of Saint Demetrios. Clift explains:

> Saint Demetrios. Demeter's day. Harvest and fruitfulness. It seemed good to be reminded of eternal things on such a morning, sitting in the sunshine with one's good friends.[44]

With her reference to the saint and what she calls 'eternal things', Clift is reaffirming the importance of the traditional way of life on the island and underlining the shallowness of what passed for 'western' values during the invasion. Early in Peel me a Lotus Clift had described the expatriates and her own family thus:

> Every one of us, in his particular way, is a protestant against the rat-race of modern commercialism, against the faster and faster scuttling

> through an endless succession of sterile days that begin without hope and end without joy.[45]

The problem is still to do with just what is meant by 'civilization'. There has not been much peeling or eating of lotuses in this account of these months on the island, February to October, as depicted in Nancy Dignan's illustrations which divide off each month. That the journey has been difficult no doubt makes the arrival more enjoyable. Henry, George and Sean are starting a discussion on Sykes' often repeated maxim, 'better a handful with quietness than two handfuls with labour and a striving after wind'. But it is Creon who brings the wheel full circle:

> But Creon said: 'Ladies and gentlemen! Shall we adjourn to Katsikas' Bar?

Thus the book has made its cyclical trip, arriving back at Katsikas' Bar. There is real development discernable in this book, compared with Mermaid Singing where the emphasis was on the indigenous people of the island, albeit in the context of their relations with the Johnston family. In Peel me a Lotus, Clift is more concerned with the expatriates, their influence on the island and its people and the influence of the island on the expatriates. There is no attempt in this book to hide ugliness or to cover up problems. The Johnston family relationship is explored with the beginnings of disenchantment with the island, with themselves and with life. Human values are

examined and questioned.

Clift's style has also developed, revealing many of the elements which will surface in the essays. The accumulation of images, the apt use of extended metaphor, the eye for detail and the power of description are all evident. She makes great use of irony and unpretentiously introduces classical and literary allusions to further cultural awareness and for embellishment. The summing up of an issue with a pithy and humorous closure and the intensely personal style that gives the impression of speaking to an individual, these hallmarks of the Charmian Clift phenomenon, are to be found in Peel me a Lotus.

NOTES

1. PMAL, p.111.
2. letter by GJ to publishers, quoted and commented on by GK, Kinnane, p.147.
3. Interviews with Martin Johnston, Radio Helicon, ABC Broadcast, transmission date 14.7.86.
4. MS, p.25.
5. PMAL, p.11.
6. p.10.
7. p.14-16.
8. Cf. almost any encyclopaedic work, but in this case: The World's Mythology in Color, Veronica Ions, (Chartwell Books, 1974), University Desk Encyclopedia, (Concord books, 1977). Creon, uncle of Oedipus, was King of Thebes after Oedipus slayed his own father. He has importance in myth, legend and literature. It was he who sentenced Antigone to death for her symbolic attempt to bury her dead brother. He was firm but just, probably the way Creon in this book sees himself and certainly the way he is depicted. Socrates was the ancient Greek philosopher who wrote nothing himself but had his life and thought recorded by Plato in the 'dialogues'. He 'made at least two fundamental contributions to Western philosophy: by shifting the focus of Greek philosophy from cosmology to ethics; and by developing the "Socratic method" of inquiry'.
9. PMAL, p.12.
10. In 1988 I stayed on Hydra for some time and interviewed many people with memories of the Johnston family and their time on Hydra. In particular I spoke with Captain Theodorus Lembassis, a school friend of Martin and Shane Johnston, and with his sister, [her daughter Androula acted as interpreter] Mrs Dimitris Neokosmidis, who was also at school with the Johnston children. Mrs Neokosmidis had school photos showing the two Australians with their classmates, Martin standing out because of his stature and both standing out because of the lightness of their hair. From what I could tell, the father of these two Hydrans was the model for the character of Socrates, though this was not his real name, nor did the name 'Socrates' have any particular significance for Captain Lembassis. A fluent English speaker, he described his father as a carpenter who dabbled in house selling and who liked to help people, particularly new people to the island. Captain Lembassis said that 'the house by the well' became available because the woman in it died, leaving the house to her niece who had no use for it. GT.
11. The Katsikas brothers really do have a bar now, quite an impressive cafe with sidewalk tables, adjacent to the old grocery shop which still functions as such. Nick Katsikas was 'in Piraeus' during my visit to Hydra in 1988 but his nephew, who runs the bar/cafe, spent some time with me, showing me the grocery store and where the Johnstons, Nolans and others of the expatriate group would sit and drink and argue. The nephew, and the Lembassis brother and sister mentioned above, felt that the

Johnstons drank less than their companions and were usually the first to leave the 'drinking sessions'. The Johnstons are remembered as 'family people well-liked'. Clift mentions their uniqueness amongst the foreign community as having children and 'responsibilities'. Interviews, GT, Hydra, 1988.

12. Kinnane, p. 165

13. They are readily recognisable on many counts, not least by the subjects of 'Henry's' paintings -- which include treatments of Icarus and Gallipoli--but also by the descriptions of the couple. This identification has been well covered by Garry Kinnane, following his interview with Sir Sidney Nolan in 1982.

14. PMAL, p.64.

15. The time with Nolan on Hydra will be recalled in the 'Herald' essays and the particular incident recounted above is repeated, with more general significance, in the essay, 'The Rare Art of Inspiring Others'.

> "On with the dream," he would say, and things like that never sounded pretentious coming from him, because he would grin mockingly and say, "They'll get your kidney fat anyway." To one pessimistic Irish writer he said, "You want to fly? Then jump up and bloody well fly!" Once I said, "Why wish for the moon?" And very firmly he replied, "Why not? For heaven's sake why not?" (I in A, p.77, published in the 'Herald' 1/4/65)

16. Brian Adams, Sidney Nolan Such is Life, p.130.

17. Kinnane, pp. 179-80.

18. PMAL, p.127.

19. This account of the pregnancy, taking place contemporaneously with the narrative, was happening in the 1950's. It was a time in overwhelmingly middle-class Australia particularly, and in western countries generally, when pregnancy was still a very discreet affair. Clift introduces readers to the 'private' life, well-known, but normally not the subject of 'public comment'.

20. PMAL, pp.23-24.

21. Kinnane, p.157, original letter in Mitchell Library, Cynthia Nolan to Pat Flower.

22. PMAL, p.29.

23. In my interviews on Hydra with Captain Lembassis and his sister [see above], it was evident by their description that the Espanola is well-remembered as a constant companion of the Johnstons. Lola is described by Clift as the 'artist wife' of Sean Donovan, an Irish schoolmaster. There is no reference to her being Spanish and indeed this seems unlikely. It is apparently the fact of her being dark and extremely overweight that makes her fit some island stereotype of Spanish, so she is the Espanola.

24. PMAL, p.38.

25. p.41.

26. p.70.

27. p.71.

28. p.149.

29. p.162.

30. PMAL, p.163.
31. Ruth Park, 'Nothing But Writers', The Independent Monthly, September, 1989, pp. 32-3.
32. PMAL, pp.163,4.
33. p.69.
34. p.160.
35. Cf. Dorothy Jones seminar, an unpublished paper, 'Post Colonial Gothic: The Scarecrow, The Double Hook, Tourmaline', New Literatures Research Centre, The University of Wollongong, 27th August, 1991.
36. PMAL, pp.160-1.
37. p.172.
38. When I was on Hydra in 1988, the water tankers were a regular feature of life on the island. Two tankers were

crossing daily from the mainland with water. The old well outside 'The Johnston House' had long since been sealed over. GT.
39. PMAL, p.178.
40. p.179.
41. Johnston wrote a short story, Strong-man from Piraeus, that provides the title for Garry Kinnane's selection of short stories by Johnston and Clift. Johnston's story is set on Kalymnos. The strong man is evidently a Greek tradition. The feats performed by both strong-men are similar, bending of bars, straightening of horseshoes etc. but the Hydra strongman adds 'a final feat of strength never yet performed', the firing of a cannon chained to his body. One is reminded naturally of Joseph Conrad's Gaspar Ruiz, though Conrad's strong-man suffers a personal destruction.
42. PMAL, p.185-6.
43. p.189.
44. p.195.
45. p.19.

X. BROTHER JACK

> I think that My Brother Jack is an admirable book. I admire it and respect it, and I wouldn't want to meddle with it as a book. Anyway since I've been involved in it from the beginning, I've done my meddling long since and far away.[1]

Television had come to Australia in 1956 and by 1965 it was very much a part of Australian life. However, the much hoped-for Australian cultural content had not eventuated. Donald Horne sums up the dreary reality:

> Television in Australia in the 1960s was predominantly a repeat of what was being shown in the United States (for the commercial stations) and Britain (for the government stations). Nearly all drama was imported. Only one Australian show, Homicide, surfaced in the ratings. The characteristic Australian production was the game show or chat-and-variety show--because they were cheap to run.[2]

On the islands of Kalymnos and Hydra, where even the electric light was sporadic and could not be taken for granted, there had been nothing electronic and nothing corresponding to a modern daily newspaper. Clift was excited at the prospect of working with the newer (for her) 'more immediate forms of communication'. She revealed her aims in this direction in the De Berg interview recorded on the 8th August, 1965.

> So last year we both came back and brought the children with us. I've found myself fascinated with the more immediate forms of communication... newspapers, journals, radio, television, which I'd never seen before... I'm writing faster and better over and

> over and over... this is the big thing I set out to find on the other side of the world. Australia. An imminent country. So exciting...part of that movement towards something. Very, very Australian. I'm not at all sure that I'm a novelist at all... newer forms of communication. Television is in a pretty sad plight here. Films. I know I'd like to write a play. I'm writing for TV. These various media of this age and of this time.

Early in 1965, Clift was retained by the ABC to write an adaptation of My Brother Jack.[3] She was no stranger to writing scripts for radio, but this was her first venture into a major television project. In a radio interview shortly before the television series appeared, Clift described her method and approach to television script-writing in general, and to the My Brother Jack series in particular. Her comments provide a fascinating insight into her aims and show how she was able to turn Johnston's book into her own creation.

> I am a novice at writing for television. Until I came back to this country eleven months ago I'd not even seen television, except once or twice in the English countryside on a set that was probably the original model and should properly have been in the Science Museum. So that when I was landed with the job of adapting my husband's novel for the little box, I plunged into books by the experts, frantically scrabbling for guidance, or at least a set of rules to go by.
>
> What happened in the end was that I sat down and visualised the television screen and wrote down on paper what I wanted to happen on it, what I wanted to see, what I wanted to hear...groups and splittings of people, according to the dramatic situation that I wanted to emphasise; quietnesses, and intensities.... So, what I did eventually was to take the portion of the book I found most significant, the years of the Depression, and to cram into this as much of the earlier part of the book and as much of the later part as I could without overloading it.[1]

Showing an awareness of the different demands and possibilities of the two media Clift decided what was 'most significant' and what was artistically possible. Within these demands and restraints she was anxious to remain as true to the spirit of the book as possible. It is not always so with television 'adaptations'. Edmund Carpenter states the reality quite clearly:

> Feeding the product of one medium through another medium creates a new product. When Hollywood buys a novel, it buys a title and the publicity associated with it: nothing more. Nor should it.[4]

With regard to the My Brother Jack Television series, Clift concluded the Radio Helicon interview with a clear statement of her intent.

> What I have tried to do, what I hope I have done, is to stick to the truth of the book, the essence of it, and present it in terms more dramatically suitable to that little viewing screen than long chapters of narrative. I've done it with love and care and thought and as much understanding as I have. And great respect.[1]

Although she refers to the series as an adaptation, it was never her intention, nor the intention of the producer, that the series should be merely an adaptation. The proper exploitation of the different medium of television indeed ruled out that possibility. Clift was aware from the start that her My Brother Jack was intrinsically different from Johnston's. Edmund Carpenter sums up this essential difference that she and Storry Walton were exploiting.

> Each medium, if its bias is properly exploited, reveals and communicates a unique aspect of reality,

> of truth. Each offers a different perspective, a way of seeing an otherwise hidden dimension of reality. It's not a question of one reality being true, the others distortions. One allows us to see from here, another from there, a third from still another perspective...[4]

Before writing the series, Clift wrote the following "Outline and synopsis of a suggested serial for ABC television"

> THEME & TREATMENT
> This will be a serial in ten 30-minute episodes. The period directly covered will be from about 1929 to 1939. It will thus be based on part of the novel of the same name, but will not be an outright adaptation from the book.[5]

She then drew on the review of the novel in the English "New Statesman" to describe the thematic quality she would be seeking for the television series.

> The story predominantly will be a human and dramatic account of the two brothers' conflicting personalities and aspirations, their loyalties and betrayals, their struggles to escape the deadening and stifling monotony of their surroundings, their adventures with the women they choose, and finally the sort of men they become...each quite different from the other, yet each, in his way, completely and identifiably Australian. This could be a very moving and profoundly Australian story. (ibid.)

The 'Australian-ness' of My Brother Jack was of even more importance to the television series than to the novel.[6] There was a plethora of cheap overseas programmes and an underlying hunger for something good and Australian. This was the early sixties, the beginning of a period when Australians were to look more critically at their own identity.[7]

It seems natural that Charmian Clift should have come

to mind when producers thought of adapting My Brother Jack for the still new (for Australia) and exciting medium of television. She was the wife of the author and she had qualities as a writer and communicator that were clearly discernible. The producer of the series, Storry Walton, later stated that Clift was 'potentially one of Australia's best screen writers'.[8]

The painstaking working out of plot that had taken her so long with her novels would not be relevant in the adaptation of the novel My Brother Jack. Here she could give relatively free reign to her creative stylistic powers. The Clift of Mermaid Singing and Peel me a Lotus would be able to write the TV script, knowing she had an already proven successful story. By selecting and developing the scenes she chose from the already existing book, she would create something new. This was a freedom she was finding in her essays, freedom to express herself in a different, more suitable, medium. This was the Charmian Clift phenomenon. As an absolute newcomer she produced a remarkable Australian television series

The actor Tessa Mallos, who played the part of the artist's model Jess in the television production, summed up the feeling for the programme in an interview for Radio Helicon.

> My Brother Jack was a big advance in Australian television drama. The only thing before from the beginning of TV in 1956-57 had been those ABC historical dramas that were done live to air. My Brother Jack was the first one that had a big impact

> and it dealt with the Depression and people could remember that and it was just phenomenal...The feeling was there in the production, you knew it was good, you knew that you were doing something worthwhile. It wasn't sort of your Consider Your Verdict type which was all there had really been in commercial drama or the odd soap opera. There had been nothing really Australian before My Brother Jack and it really was the first really Australian production dealing with Australians and I think that's what captured the public's imagination. They were really seeing themselves for the first time.[1]

It was 'really Australian'. By crashing through the assumption that 'if anything on television is any good, it must have been made overseas', the My Brother Jack series made Australians feel good about themselves. Donald Horne illustrates the contrast between this series and what passed for Australian shows making the same point as Mallos.

> Television sessions such as Bob and Molly Dyer's Pick-A-Box...could seem to reach depths of suburban banality. But when George Johnston wrote My Brother Jack, its portrait of the suburbs produced a sympathetic response in Australians that made the ABC's dramatization of it one of the significant television events of the 1960s. When viewers saw a marriage scene such as this above, ('still' from the series) they could feel they were seeing themselves.[9]

The public's imagination was captured, with the series becoming a major topic of conversation and comment. Olga Masters' son Chris remembers "the TV drama 'My Brother Jack' being watched eagerly at the Castle Hills home" by his family.[7] In Federal Parliament the series was referred to by members of the conservative government as being 'produced by a leftish writer and a leftish cell within the ABC'.[1] The majority of viewers did not see it

this way, they were seeing themselves for the first time on their own national television.

Clift herself was delighted with the series and she expressed this delight in the letter to David Higham, 27 November, 1965, where she talks of:

> ...barging into television with a ten-part serial of My Brother Jack that is getting rave notices from astonished critics who didn't seem to know that we could make good television in Australia.[8]

Just how different is the series from the book? One of the memorable scenes from the series is Jack's arrival and collapse at the front door of 'Avalon', having walked the coast road from Sydney. The setting and action in the television series are completely transformed to gain visual and emotional impact. In the novel, Jack arrives home to a quiet, purposely banal suburban scene.

> Jack came back one wild winter evening in July, with hard squalls of rain blowing in on the southerly, and Dad and I were sitting by the gas-fire reading the papers and waiting for Mother to bring supper in from the kitchen, and she came in wiping her hands on her apron and said: "Wasn't that somebody at the front door?"[10]

'sitting by the gas-fire reading papers', 'Mother... supper... kitchen... wiping her hands on her apron...', Johnston is at pains to evoke the ordinariness of the scene. This has the dramatic effect of contrast with what is to follow.

> ... a strange strangled cry of "Mum!" above the slash and slap of rain against the window, and immediately after this a heavy crashing thud.

In the visual medium, Clift exploits the dramatic

potential with precise instructions for the camera.

> Scene 17: On film Jack's feet, weaving and stumbling, a bloody pulp now, the motor tyre soles gone, strips of bloodsoaked rag trailing behind him.

Clift's employment of the 'close-up' suggests her grasp of the medium and her realisation of its potential impact. For Jack's arrival home she departs most from the text of the novel, bringing together elements of strong dramatic effect. The song 'Rose of No-man's Land' appears at the beginning of the book. It is a song full of meaning and inference, linking the Depression with the First World War and presaging the war to come. For the wounded returned soldiers at 'Avalon', 'Mum' was 'The Rose of No-man's land'. Clift chooses to use the song in this scene where the 'jingoistic bathos' aids the contrast with Jack's arrival. Her instructions are specific:

> (OVER THIS SHOT WE HEAR, IN A FAINT AND DISCORDANT WAY, AS IF IN A NIGHTMARE, PEOPLE SINGING "THE ROSE OF NO MAN'S LAND" TO THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF A PIANOLA. IT SWELLS TO FULL VOLUME AS WE CUT TO:)
>
> Scene 18: Set 1 "Avalon" (as above). They are at the climax of the song. DAD singing away at the top of his voice and STUBBY blinking with nostalgia and emotion. The camera is on the photograph of MUM in her uniform as they end the song. They are toasting mum when there is a strange distant cry and a noise at the door which they hardly notice for their laughter. A louder knocking stops the conviviality. MUM says whoever can that be at this hour and goes out. Still laughing she is at the vestibule opening the door. There is an awful strangled cry of "Mum!" as JACK lurches and falls head-first through the door. EVERYBODY gathers horrified at the door to the dining-room as the camera pans over JACK's prostrate body from rain-soaked head and tattered shirt to bloody and pulped feet. (FADE OUT)[11]

The song, the pianola and the family 'singalong' are not new features, they were present already in the book. Indeed, these are elements readily associated by Australians with the period between the two world wars. The family gathered around the pianola is a symbol of cheerfulness in adversity. This is how Australians liked to think of themselves. 'The Rose of No Man's Land', a syrupy, 'tear-jerker' song clearly identified with 'Mum' contrasts completely with the real drama at the front door and the cry: 'Mum'. The scene is 'worked' for emotional and dramatic impact using the capabilities of the different medium. The nostalgic warmth of the singing overlays the sight of the staggering bloodied figure. The emotional contrast is achieved with the conviviality of the inside scene which continues to the last second with mum still laughing in the vestibule. Once Clift has made the impact, she shows her artistic grasp of the use of the medium by 'fading out' at the point of most dramatic impact. She is concerned with the impact on the viewer, her audience. The impact in the book has been just as dramatic but Johnston continues with the scene and brings to the reader the impact on David Meredith, his 'alter ego', the protagonist and narrator.

> It was the sight of Jack's feet that shocked me first - the broken uppers of his boots hanging in strips of wet leather, and his soles a mass of blood and torn flesh and the wet threads of ruined socks, all pulped into a horrid wet paste...[10]

This is precisely the picture that Clift has presented but in a different order and from the point of view of the viewer, without the intermediary of the narrator. After Jack's arrival at the front door, Johnston re-inserts David Meredith into the action.

> ...and I pushed out through the door and raced through the pelt of rain to Gillons' house to telephone the doctor. (ibid.)

The scene in the book where Helen Midgeley appears naked before the 'virgin' David Meredith provides another example of the difference of approach between the book and the television series. That the scene appeared at all on television shows a certain amount of daring on the part of producer and writer and a determination to rise above the very real restrictions existing on television in the mid 1960's. At this time, the slightest hint of nudity on the screen caused violent reactions in the press and there were many in the community ready to protest about any appearance of the human body.[12] It shows confidence in Clift's taste that the producer and the ABC allowed the scene to appear.

The scene is important to the book, as Helen Midgeley's seduction of David Meredith provides some of his self-justification for his actions later in the novel. In the television series it provides an excellent visual opportunity. In the scene as presented to the viewer there is just a quick flash of Helen's body and then a fade-out.

In the book, David has time to consider and describe in some detail what he sees.

> ...something made me look up, and Helen was standing just inside the parting of the curtain, with one hand on her hip and the other holding back the drape, and she had taken all her clothes off! She just stood there, not four feet away from where I sat rigid in the cane arm-chair, looking down at me with the tiniest suggestive smile at her mouth, and the only adornment to her slender startling nudity was a heart-shaped gold locket on a chain around her neck.
> That much I remember. Her overpowering loveliness, that smile beneath the casque of golden hair, the long lean flanks of her nakedness, youthful sensuality imaged for me for the first time.[11]

By the simple expedient of saying: 'and she had taken all her clothes off!' rather than 'she was naked' or 'she was in the nude', Johnston has managed to convey the absolute innocence of David Meredith. Clift does not try as hard to establish this innocence. She may not have been as highly motivated as Johnston in this regard. All that is shown is the naked glimpse and the flight.

It takes far longer to read Johnston's account than the tiny glimpse the viewer is afforded on television. Then Johnston describes in detail David Meredith's panic-stricken flight and the effect it has on him. The next page is a continual repetition of 'I' until the narrator finally has to 'face (his) own hot pained confused self'. Underlying all this is the essential difference between a pen and a camera. In the television account the visual image is what the viewer is given and left with.

In the book, Jack's trip to the Wimmera to apply for

a job during the Depression is vital to the story. His departure from Melbourne allows Davey to come back home. The Wimmera episode is of such importance to Jack that the narrator actually explains this to the reader.

> Neither of us was aware of it at the time, but that was an important ratchet in Jack's destiny. It was that job in the Wimmera that closed the door upon his youth forever, that gave him the woman who was to become his wife, that eventually would move him into days of disaster.
>
> When he came out of the shop his face was one big grin.
>
> "Thanks, nipper," he said.
>
> "For what? It's my turn, isn't it?"...
>
> I'd made him sign up for the Wimmera job so that I would have an excuse for going home.[13]

The use of the first person pronoun twice in that last sentence reinforces the central position that David Meredith represents in this story ostensibly about his brother. Clift was obviously aware of the importance of this Wimmera episode. In the 'Outline and synopsis' for the serial she had stated:

> Note: The location sequence of Jack and Sheila in the Wimmera is the most important and the most ambitious on film sequence in the entire serial.

Yet the Wimmera episode, which was to be Episode 2 of the serial, was dropped completely from the final version. There may well have been cost-cutting demands as Clift herself is on record as saying that television is limited by time, budget and medium.[1] Nevertheless, the change from the Wimmera marks the extent to which she was taking over My Brother Jack. Her letter to Walton, quoted below, setting out the 'new approach' to Episode 2 of the series,

is a clear indication that she was making the series her own creation. There is a tone of excitement in what is really only a note to the producer. Clift is using the series to evoke the Australia of the Depression and to exploit 'facets of Australian life' in a creative manner, within the framework of her husband's novel.

> Suggested new approach for Episode 2. Summary of scenes. (NOTE: Jack working in a pub gives rise to numerous possibilities and the exploitation of facets of Australian life --- SP betting, the six o'clock swill, the developing drama of the Depression, trouble and strife galore as Jack does his money on the horses, treats unfortunates to free drinks on the house, fights with the toughs, and woos Sheila, no girl of easy conquest. But the fact that she is a barmaid as well as a Catholic will later inflame DAD to the point of apoplexy, and Jack will inevitably be sacked through altruism to his mates or misguided and superfluous protection of Sheila. Sheila will be sacked too, but that comes later.)[4]

The framework of the novel is becoming less important than the message about Australia that Clift is presenting. There is a neat tidying up with the statement

> Scenes 2 to 10 will stand much as they are, in the earlier breakdown, with the difference that Jack will try for a job, not in the Wimmera, but in Melbourne.

Clift has thus departed considerably from the novel in changing completely what both she and Johnston regarded as a very important scene. The television medium has become more important than the text. Clift makes the change in a positive way as we have just seen, justifying it with the 'numerous possibilities' that arise from the new setting and the 'exploitation' of what she sees as 'facets of Australian life'. There were other advantages

to flow from the change. By keeping the action in and around Melbourne, Clift is achieving a unity of place for her creation and giving more scope to her own creativity. She is also following the reality more closely. According to Jack Johnston, he never did go to the Wimmera or indeed move far from Melbourne until the war.[14]

In a more refined version of her theme, Clift stated much more clearly for the producers exactly what she intended the series to be.

> The story will be set against the suburban Australian background of the late nineteen-twenties, moving through the end of the "Jazz Age" and the Depression years to the outbreak of the Second World War -- a period highly communicable to the older generation by their own personal involvement, and with sufficient of an historical quality to excite and interest the younger generation. The major objective of the story line will be to define the growth and development from youth to manhood of the two brothers Meredith, against the background and dramatic conflicts of the period, and of their difficult home life and social environment...
>
> but we feel that one should have, as in the novel, the reassuring feeling that one is in the hands of an informed and intelligent guide, who can be relied upon to lead one through the labyrinthine ways of this suburban history.[4] (underlining by GT)

The series appeared on television on Saturday night, 21st August, 1965 at 8.50 pm. The reviewer in the next week's 'Sun-Herald' seemed to realise precisely what had happened between the book and the television series. Whereas the book had been principally concerned with David Meredith and his brother Jack, the television series was definitely about Jack. The reviewer makes this clear both with the heading and the review itself.

Doing Jack Proud

> I don't know how Jack feels about it.
> Maybe he's sinking a couple of quiet beers in Melbourne right now and turning on the telly.
> But My Brother Jack, the ABC's new home-produced serial (Saturday's 8.50 p.m.) has done him proud, as it has also the award-winning novel by George Johnston on which it is based.
> Charmian Clift, who did the TV adaptation, has done a workmanlike job of telescoping the story into a handful of Depression years.
> And producer Storry Walton has transformed it sympathetically to the TV screen.[15]

The ABC similarly were aware that they had a story about 'Jack'. The promotional advertisements carried stills of Ed Devereaux, who played Jack in the series, standing alone quizzically surveying a classical nude statue (from the scene in Sam Burlington's flat) and with the caption, 'Meet him tonight'.[15] As mentioned earlier, Donald Horne singled out the series as 'one of the significant television events of the 1960s.'[2]

The television series appeared at a very difficult time for Clift and Johnston. On 10th July, 1965, Johnston was re-admitted to Sydney's Royal North Shore Hospital suffering from "'moderately advanced' tuberculosis of the lung, breathlessness and anorexia".[16] The family had been hopeful of having a reasonable period of good health for Johnston whose ill-health had in many ways dominated family arrangements for years. The plan to establish a sort of 'writer's retreat' near Clift's home town of Kiama was shelved and never came to fruition.[17]

Having Johnston at home to 'keep an eye on the

children' had freed Clift somewhat for the lengthy time she had to spend at the studio as the transmission time for the serial approached, and although Johnston was temporarily discharged from the hospital later in July, he went back, earlier than expected, on 16 August, one week before the appearance of the series.[16]

The youngest child, Jason, went to live with the family of Jack Johnston's daughter, Joy Russo, in Victoria. George's brother Jack and his wife Patricia had been unhappy with the book My Brother Jack and the unkind light they felt it shed on Jack and George's father in particular. They had been reluctant to sign an agreement not to sue over any aspect of the ABC serial and this had the potential to seriously disrupt the series' appearance. Now they did sign and, in thanks and relief, Clift wrote them a letter which reveals her feelings for the series she had created.

> I think the Jack and Sheila that the viewers will come to know are the nicest people in the world... it's strange and unprecedented on this that we've had people bawling like babies in rehearsal, and even the producer, Storry (whom you met) was in tears as the last episode was put on tape.[16]

Chester Eagle carried out a lengthy interview with Jack and Patricia Johnston in their home on the 29th July, 1980, in which they spoke freely about their relationship with George and Charmian. The feeling that comes through the interview is that Jack and Pat felt neglected and snubbed.[14]

When Eagle drew Pat and Jack out about Charmian and George, Pat in particular was quite frank. The comments are fragmented as they are in response to Eagle's questions but his questioning is never leading.

> Now they did not get on at all... They crucified one another... She was a dreadful alcoholic, Charm was... She was a glamorous thing when she married him... She was a very beautiful girl... They destroyed one another. (ibid.)

With regard to the 'bloodied feet' incident made so much of in the book and the series, Jack said that he came neither from South America nor from Sydney but rather walked from Melbourne to Elsternwick. (Chester Eagle reminds him that, as George had been at pains to point out, My Brother Jack was a work of fiction.)

With regard to Clift's influence on Johnston, Pat says that George was 'fairly illiterate' after leaving school and she claims that she (Pat) had to help him with his job application form. Pat adds that George was the only one (at The Argus) who had no University education. She says, and Eagle has her repeat it, that Charmian must have been a very good influence on him. Pat later points out that her eldest daughter and her husband took 'little Jason' to help Charmian out.

> They had that little boy a couple of years and looked after him and I think Charmian came down twice in that two years to see him... wouldn't be any more than twice.

Jack adds "Well, she wasn't a good mother; that's number one". Pat says: "She neglected her children terribly"....

"Ray (Ray Crooke) and his wife told me that they literally destroyed one another. And there seemed to be this professional jealousy between them".(ibid.)

Out of this muddled and difficult household came the 'tour de force' that was the My Brother Jack television series. By choosing to end the series at the outbreak of World War Two, Clift ensures that the Charmian Clift figure, Cressida Morley, does not appear. Morley is a crucial figure in the book and she effectively dominates the ending. The character Gavin Turley gives a detailed introduction and description of her that encompasses Clift's own early life.

> "...Consider her beginnings. She is born on a barren mile of Pacific beach. Not a soul goes there. Nothing but sand-dunes and sharks and kelp. Oh, a log or two of driftwood, perhaps. And our Cress..."
>
> It was perfectly and absolutely right, of course! It had to be -- That was where her eyes came from, out of the ocean, out of the endless Pacific depths. And that was precisely what she was -- a savage, a pagan, an authentic something that was quite different from anything else... and she was only twenty now, and she would have gone from her lonely beach to a gun-site and from a gun-site to Gavin Turley, and she would never have known a suburban street in her life, or a garden subdivision, and she wouldn't know an Antirrhinum from a Phlox Drummondii or a mock-orange if one fell on her!... and I saw suddenly that there was something about her, some absolute and perfect directness that reminded me of my brother Jack... she was not the same sort of person as Jack, no, but she was the same sort of thing...That was it...[19]

Cressida Morley, then, in the eyes of David Meredith, has the non-suburban qualities that he has found lacking in his wife Helen and, at the same time, has the perceived

virtues of his idolised brother Jack. She provides the denouement for the novel, extricating the protagonist from the suburbia he has come to hate. By providing the excuse for Meredith not to attend his brother's little 'get-together' in the mess, she illustrates the weakness in Meredith's character. By thus dominating the end of My Brother Jack, Morley provides the link and the entree into the next book of the trilogy, Clean Straw for Nothing. This is a lot to leave out, particularly, one might think, when the Clift figure is presented so sympathetically, in much the way she liked to regard herself: young, vivacious, attractive to men. Clift's decision in this matter appears to have been made on artistic grounds as was shown by her preliminary communications with the ABC.

The television series required many such editorial decisions. Clift's first professional writing had been as editor of the Ordnance Corps magazine For Your Information, and this experience may have helped her in deciding what to use or discard. One can see how much of the book has been condensed into Episode One of the My Brother Jack television series by reading Clift's 'Cast for Episode One' as presented in the script.

> JACK MEREDITH, a young man in his middle twenties
> DAVID MEREDITH, his brother, some two years younger
> JACK MEREDITH Sr., The father of the boys, a big, surly, embittered man of early middle age.
> MINNIE MEREDITH, the boys' mother, a suburban woman, kindly but undistinguished.
> JOE DENTON, an elderly lithographer, David's boss (one scene only)
> SAM BURLINGTON, a young art student, slightly older

than David (one scene only)
JESS, Sam's girl friend, also an art student (one scene only)
BLUEY BENNETT, a tough young larrikin who works in the brickyard (one scene only)
WINNIE, a young suburban dressmaker who is Jack's current girl friend (one scene only)
Extras.[4]

Thus, very large sections of the book are to be presented in this first dramatic episode. All these incidents occurred well before either of the boys was in his 'middle twenties' but they are satisfactorily brought together. The Episode begins at 'Avalon', The Johnston home, where, with a 'big row at dinner', the characters of the parents are established.

There is a scene in the sleepout where the relationship between the brothers is brought out. The viewer sees Davey at work in the lithography studio and at the Gallery Art School. The important incident of the purchase of the old Remington typewriter is presented in this Episode, establishing David's aspirations and ambitions as a writer. Jack fights Bluey Bennett in the brickyard, winning the fight and tossing him into the horse trough. The fight concerns insults to the dressmaker and Jack is established as a tough, rough diamond, fighting gallantly for a lady's honour. He earns the respect of the older workers, idealised in the way Australians like to think of as being 'typically Australian'.

Jack senior 'kicks Davey out' because of the

typewriter and then Jack finds Davey at Sam Burlington's studio for the enactment of the cleverly developed scene of the 'rough diamond' establishing instant rapport with the 'real intellectual'. This was a memorable scene in the book, providing authentication for the values that Jack represents. The ensuing party is exploited by the visual medium, using the props of the artist's studio for dramatic effect and enabling the presentation of interesting looking characters. The 'stills' from this scene were used extensively in ABC publicity for the series.

By the end of Episode One, the setting of Melbourne between the wars is clearly defined and the main characters have been presented'. By the end of the series, we have run the full 'suburban gamut'. Davey's new home in 'the estate' is contrasted to its disadvantage with Jack and Sheila's cottage. The episode of Davey's gum-tree is visually exploited for its symbolism to show the emptiness of the new life to which he and his wife Helen have aspired.

Clift produced a television series ideally suited to its time. The Charmian Clift Phenomenon owed much to her sense of audience. She was not only able to divine what Australians wanted to read or see, she was also able to provide it. Australian television needed some intelligent local content and the series provided that. In the mid

1960s there was a perceived lack of an identifiable Australian culture. The times were summed up by Manning Clark at the start of the decade as follows:

> For in Australia we see all around us a civilisation in decay. What we see and hear is a debased and degraded form of the movements which have created our civilisation.[19]

Horne explained the dilemma for Australians at the time.

> Central among Australia's problems as it entered the 1960s was that some of the values of the culture it had inherited from Europe were in conflict with the realities of Australian life...This position in which a Europe-derived society had developed aberrant characteristics but was expected to judge itself and see itself totally in terms of European culture, not even contemporary European culture, but European culture as it had been (and an export-only version of European culture, at that), may have been responsible for some of the extreme anti-intellectualism of many educated Australians.[20]

In My Brother Jack, Johnston, living overseas at the time, had produced a major work firmly grounded in Australian culture. Clift had translated this work and its non-European based values to the screen. She saw the need to stress a strong Australian hero and hence increased the emphasis on Jack rather than David Meredith. The awakening consciousness of literate Australians, which accompanied the realisation of the need to see beyond European values, was exploited and at the same time nurtured and encouraged by the successful television production.

The series does not end with the Clift figure but with the war. There are nineteen separate scenes in

Episode Ten, the last episode, as image follows image. The new war is linked to the First World War with appropriate visual and verbal images: 'mufflers, balaclavas, mittens and socks.' The viewer is told: 'Wars are the culture of the poor...'[21] The implication is that it has taken wars to give Australians a cultural identity.

In Episode One there was the riotous, free, spontaneous party in Sam Burlington's studio. In Episode Ten, the final episode, the series ends on the artificiality of Helen's party. The contrast is biting. Clift has selected from material that was there to produce her own effects and deliver a dramatic message with artistry. The final instruction on the script summarises what has been attempted and what has been achieved.

On a nostalgic swell of wartime music we come to

THE END.

NOTES

1. quoted on 'Radio Helicon', reel 3. As this is from a recorded interview, I have provided the punctuation myself. GT.
2. Donald Horne, The Lucky Country Revisited, (J.M.Dent, Knoxfield, Victoria, 1987) pp.198-200.
3. Clift's typewritten scripts and much of the correspondence about the series are stored at the National Library. MS. 5027.
4. Ohlgren and Berk, The New Languages, pp.10-12.
5. NATIONAL LIBRARY MS 5027, Box 2, folder 3, Item 3.
6. Cf.Kinnane, p.228. The novel was released in Britain in January, 1964, two months before its release in Australia. As Kinnane says, this was 'partly to act as advance publicity for the Australian release'. In the Australian literary scene of the 1960's, success overseas was considered almost a prerequisite for success in Australia. The overseas launch would also give the publishers a 'trial run' before they spent money on a big launch in Australia. Johnston and Clift had both written books for them before which had received literary acclaim but the hoped-for financial success had proved elusive. In the pre-launch build-up for My Brother Jack in Australia, much was made of Johnston's expatriate years and of his 'triumphant return'. The reception of the book in Britain was excellent. The Illustrated London News referred to it as 'one of the greatest books written this century' and "even the more temperate reviews recognised its exceptional quality, without always using the condescending qualifier 'Australian'". In the Television world things were different.
7. Alan Seymour's play The One Day of the Year had appeared in 1962 and had also been made into a television drama. The play caused a furore with its questioning of long-cherished perceptions and hitherto apparently inviolate Australian assumptions about defending 'the mother country', the unique bravery of all Australian soldiers, and the complete support of all Australians for decisions made by the Government.
8. Nadia Wheatley, 'Radio Helicon', Tape 3.
9. Horne, pp. 24-5.
10. MBJ, p.175.
11. Episode 7, Scene 18.
12. Horne, pp.58 et seq. In his chapter 'Wowsers', Horne attributes the Australian repressive attitude to nudity to lingering puritanical influence. As he points out, the 1969 stage production of Hair helped to bring strict stage censorship to an end.
13. MBJ, pp.123-4.
14. Chester Eagle tapes, Jack and Pat Johnston, TRC 821, 29.7.1980.
15. Sun-Herald, August 29, 1965.

16. Kinnane, pp.248-51.
17. Kiama Independent, November 24, 1964.
18. MBJ, pp.370-1.
19. Manning Clark, NATION, February 27, 1960, 'Hope From the Bomb'. (reprinted in Inglis, K.S. NATION, The Life of an Independent Journal of Opinion, 1958-1972, p.49.)
20. Horne, p.177.
21. NATIONAL LIBRARY MS 5027, Box 2, folder 3, Item 3. Garry Kinnane notes further that this quotation 'originated in an English review of MBJ.' (examiner's report, 11th March, 1992.)

XI. W O M E N C O L U M N I S T S

When John Douglas Pringle, after discussion with Angus McLachlan, offered Charmian Clift the opportunity to write a weekly column for The 'Herald' he was following a tradition established in 1860. The Sydney Morning Herald had employed women journalists and columnists in times when most papers regarded these positions as mainly a male prerogative. In 1860 they had appointed Anna Blackwell to the coveted position of foreign correspondent, an appointment she kept for 'well over thirty years'.[1] As was usual in those days, Anna Blackwell used a pseudonym for her columns, signing herself 'Stella' for the Sydney Morning Herald and 'Fidelitas' for columns and despatches for other papers in the United States and the British colonies. Patricia Clarke quotes from one of her first pieces, six full length columns of closely packed type, datelined 24 October, Paris and appearing in the paper on 18 December 1860.

> A highly intelligent Frenchman, who has for several years occupied an important public post at Bucharest, and who is intimately acquainted with all the region which Austria would so much like to add to her dominions at the expense of Turkey, has given me some curious particulars of the late Prince Milosch, and the way in which he governed.(ibid)

The passage is, as Clarke says, 'a good example of

her chatty style as she shared confidences from the capitals of Europe with her readers in far-off Sydney'. At that time newspapers generally projected an impersonal objective style so that the intimate tone created by the use of the first person pronoun is unusual. This confiding 'chatty' manner was also used by Clift in her essays. The word 'chatty' can have a reductive side to it and could well imply condescension when used by male newspapermen for the work of their female colleagues. Here it is used as a compliment and an important innovation. The reader has the feeling of being let into important and valuable secrets from an elevated and remote section of society.

Indeed, Anna Blackwell's style was the subject of discussion between the proprietor of the 'Herald', John Fairfax, and his son James. 'James Fairfax defended her, commenting that the articles of another writer on social affairs were very good "but the gossiping style of Miss Blackwell I think is appreciated"'.[2] The advent of the cable 'drastically reduced her newspaper outlets until only two remained. One of these, a Montreal paper, dispensed with her column in 1885 leaving her with the SMH alone'.(ibid.) The 'Herald' was then to follow the general trend to male foreign correspondents for the next century, having persisted with their female columnist longer than any other paper.

The 'Herald's' policy of employing women writers in

positions of importance continued with Emily Manning, who was highly regarded as a poet. Because of 'journalistic anonymity' it was not until after her death that the full extent of her achievement was recognised.(ibid.) Clarke's research indicates that from 1870 Manning wrote for the 'Herald' as a journalist and part-time leader writer. When the 'Herald' began a Women's column in 1888, she was its main writer.

Some of the evidence for the extent of Manning's work with the 'Herald' comes from the obituary, which sounds paternalistically condescending to modern ears. However, making allowances for the mores of one hundred years ago, it seems that Emily Manning was a gifted, dedicated and committed writer.

> Her practical skill as a literary worker was not more marked than her comprehensive taste, which was singularly broad. To social subjects she gave much of her mind, and some of her contributions to the discussion of questions of sanitation, prison discipline, forestry, as well as those domestic matters of interest that might seem to come more directly within the province of a woman's treatment have all been dealt with at different periods by her versatile pen.[3]

The 'Herald' thus had a tradition of employing talented women writers with literary achievements, particularly as columnists.

There existed also a tradition of influential and literary women columnists apart from the 'Herald'. These women, by necessity, created their own outlets in weekly

or monthly journals and, in the case of Louisa Lawson, created the journal itself.[4] Quoting from the 'RAHS Journal' of 1933, Clarke explains that she

> was a woman of strong and independent character quite prepared to battle the Typographical Association and overcome any obstacles that stood in the way of the success of her paper. Dawn was remarkably effective in fighting for women's rights for seventeen years.[5]

As Clarke says, 'The time was right for a paper that espoused the views of women who wanted to free themselves from a purely domestic role'.[6] The daily newspapers did not cater for the women Lawson was trying to reach.

Louisa Lawson, with her son Henry, had briefly edited a small news-sheet the Republican in 1887 but the much bigger Dawn was 'written, edited, produced and printed by women...(mostly one woman)'.(ibid.) Even Louisa Lawson had to use a pseudonym, Dora Falconer, for the first few years of publication of The Dawn; in later years she used her own name. This was a pragmatic paper produced by a pragmatic and committed person. On the front page of volume 1, number 1, under the heading 'About Ourselves', Lawson took a strong feminist stand in setting out the aims of the paper.

> "Woman is not uncompleted man, but diverse," says Tennyson, and being diverse why should she not have her journal in which her divergent hopes, aims and opinions may have representation. Every eccentricity of belief, and every variety of bias in mankind allies itself with a printing machine, and gets its singularities bruited about in type, but where is the printing-ink champion of mankind's better half?[7]

In 1891 The Dawn's sub-title changed from 'A Journal

for Australian Women' to 'A Journal for the Household'. This change represented an acceptance by Lawson of the realities of Australian society and widened the possible appeal, recognising that women's connection with and interest in 'the household' was firmly entrenched. This was something acknowledged and exploited by Mary Gilmore. The Dawn always reflected Lawson's strongly held views but it did become 'less crusading' and 'in its later years there were more articles on subjects such as gardening and poultry keeping, along with medical notes, fashions, recipes and a children's page'.[8] Lawson herself wrote the article explaining her decision to cease publication of Dawn in the issue of July 1905. Writing about herself she used the third person.

> ...Mrs. Lawson's existence has been made almost unendurable, overshadowed as she is by detectives, slanderers, and persecutors of the vilest type. Suffering from a keen sense of injustice, her health is again fading...And as she knows none whom she could trust to continue this Journal on the unbiassed and independent lines which has characterised it in the past -- the independent woman journalist being almost as scarce as the good man politician -- she contemplates ending her paper as she started it, quite upon her own responsibility.

Thus, sadly, ended The Dawn, but it had been a successful paper throughout its seventeen years of publication. It always attracted advertising, fulfilled a perceived need and provided an outlet and employment for women writers and printing workers. Testimonials from her readers, referred to by Lawson as 'DAWN sisters', show the

importance they placed on this publication.

> 'I would not like to be without THE DAWN, I should fancy I missed someone to come and see me.'
> 'I hardly know where to find the rent, but I must have THE DAWN.'
> 'I cannot imagine how anyone once seeing THE DAWN, could refuse to subscribe to it'.[9]

The first testimonial indicates the need for someone to speak 'personally' to women through journalism and shows that Lawson was achieving this to some extent, even though she expressed her views strongly and was not personal or subjective in her writing style. Lawson's front page article for October, 1889, reveals her strongly expressed and pragmatic views. Her use of the first person plural adds a regal overtone.

> Now we distinctly assert that we do not employ women because they work more cheaply; we have no sympathy whatever with those who employ a woman in preference to a man, merely because they think she will do as much work for a lower wage. We will be the first to aid the formation of trades' unions among working women...[10]

The Dawn came to an end, because, in the opinion of Lawson, there was a scarcity of 'the independent woman journalist'.

Mary Gilmore, who was such a person, began as editor of the Women's Page in The Australasian Worker on 2 January 1908 and continued in this position until 11 February 1931. Looking back on these years she revealed some regret about her own past in her letter to Connie Robertson on her appointment to the position of editor of the Sydney Morning Herald's new Thursday Women's Section

in February 1936. Gilmore wrote:

> As to roots and old ties, it is a case of choice of sacrifice, the roots or the tops. And to think of me saying that when I refused the SMH at 8 pounds a week to stay on at the Worker for 3 pounds (afterwards to 2 pounds) because of my damn roots![11]

There is irony and humour in Gilmore's regret expressed here to her personal friend who was the daughter of A.G. Stephens, the very influential editor of the Bulletin's 'Red Page' from 1894 to 1906 and of his own magazine, the Bookfellow, from 1907 until the early 20's.[12] Gilmore was a constant contributor to both these literary outlets and she would have known Connie Robertson very well from the years she worked as her father's (unpaid) assistant at the Bookfellow. The letter quoted above was an unequivocal congratulation to Robertson, beginning with: 'I am glad with holy joy...'. Her gladness flowed as much from the 'one on the nose' she felt Robertson had handed out to Eric Baume at the Woman and the Telegraph, as from the pleasure she felt in her friend's appointment to the Herald. As Gilmore said:

> The Herald gives you a standing and a prestige outside Australia the other papers here could not give.

She also, with some wistfulness, cautioned Robertson:

> Even there, remember that I told you 'Never give your heart to a paper' as sooner or later it will break it.

Prophetically, she added:

> Yet I expect you will be there for your old age pension if you care to sit still.(ibid.)

The letter to Connie Robertson shows Gilmore's idealism. She set herself 'the onerous and largely self-solicited task of editing a weekly page in a newspaper of limited appeal...'[13]

Sharyn Pearce outlines the extent of Gilmore's 'demanding chore' and points out that she had no need of journalism as a profession at this stage of her literary career. The Foreword to the first Women's Page in the Worker indicates the reason for Gilmore's taking on 'the onerous task'. She had a passionate concern for women's welfare and the 'page' offered her 'a rare opportunity to propagandise her feminism and socialism (and) a regular platform upon which to demonstrate the validity of her views'. As has been noted, 'Louisa Lawson's The Dawn had folded up in 1905, and female journalists were largely confined to the social columns of other newspapers'. (ibid.) Pearce sees Gilmore's tone in the Foreword as 'aggressive, hortatory, even combative'. Anticipating male criticism about the inclusion of a Women's Page in what was until then a masculine domain, she challenged them in this fashion:

> "And if men (who look on The Worker as peculiarly their paper) object to this as trifling, ridiculous, derogatory to the dignity of a man's paper, let them ask themselves: "Do we want the women's vote? Do we want that children should understand? Who teach the little children, so that the three-year-old says: "I am an Eight Hour Man, and the four-year-old boasts that his father is a unionist, and the child, grown man, is a Unionist from his boyhood? And, finally, who hungers with them when times pinch?"[14]

Gilmore's Women's Page was instantly successful and it continued for twenty-three years until February, 1931. Under her the page was a shrewd and eclectic mix of the familiar and the new, the domestic and the public, the political and the private, the Australian and the international.[15] Gilmore's style was not intimate or personal but she did introduce 'chatty anecdotes and homilies' to lighten the didactic content and varied the form of the Page with regular columns, editorials and 'household hints'. There were semi-regular sections 'such as For the Bairns (where children were encouraged to write in, to enter essay competitions and so on), and About Women (where specific achievements of women were recorded and applauded)'.(ibid.)

She 'justified her inclusion of the more ephemeral, domestic material...on the grounds that women must be lured into political and social awareness by the sight of the familiar.'(ibid.) Never trying to hide her didactic purpose, she said:

> "Little by little they must be led, but first we must interest them or they will never be led."[16]

Gilmore's use of the pronoun 'they' in referring to her prospective women readers suggests something of the distance she saw between herself and her audience. Her page does not pretend to the personal, is not 'you and me having a chat over the back fence'. She intends to instruct and inform and this she appears to have done very

effectively and for a long time.

Charmian Clift was also attempting, 'little by little,' to lead her audience; however, her readers were never 'they'. One correspondent wrote to me about the letter she had received from Clift after she had written in appreciation of one of her essays, in which she confided conspiratorially to the reader, 'we are the converted--keep on hoping for change as society will eventually accept equal rights for women'.[17] To another reader, 'It was as if someone who was older, wiser and more experienced was speaking directly to me...'.[18] Clift's aims may have been the same as Gilmore's but their methods were different.

While not appearing to regard herself as 'at one' with them, Gilmore nevertheless 'shrewdly targeted her audience, which consisted mainly of working-class women from all over Australia, both urban and rural.'[19] As Pearce points out, there is no attempt 'to modify her words for any males who might happen upon the column', but Pearce doubts that there would have been many of these, 'given the fervour of her attacks on the patriarchy's bondage of women'. Like Louisa Lawson, Gilmore is not addressing the 'emancipated' woman in her columns. She is writing 'in most cases to the woman tied to home, hearth and children'.(ibid.) Still she managed to be accessible as a journalist. As Pearce puts it:

Despite her grandiose, rather school-teacherly and

> even messianic notions of educating and enlightening a vast mass of working-class women, Gilmore frequently presents herself as just one woman among many, a neighbourly woman who simply happens to have reached a position of some authority.[20]

Quoting from letters Gilmore wrote to correspondents as evidence of her personal approach, Pearce finds that Gilmore did not patronise her audience and projected an image of herself 'as a budget-conscious housewife, much like her readers'. This persona is quite different from that of the poems and literary articles and, as Pearce says, 'The mask rarely slips from Gilmore's persona'. Even so, she is 'a pedagogue, first and foremost', rarely leavening her didacticism with any humour. Such humour as does exist has its own didactic purpose, as in a comment on fashion in which she ridicules the latest fashions and, incidentally, the sorts of people who could be bothered with fashion.

> The glitzy, tarnished glamour of the social news was ever absent from the Women's Page. Gilmore's emphasis is always on utility, not frivolity, and in her somewhat dour view working-class women were concerned only with the necessities of life, not with its dubious luxuries.(ibid.)

Gilmore's racist 'White Australia' views, while in line with the accepted 'working-class' views of the time, make strange reading now. In one of her editorials entitled 'The race or the Mongrel' she gave dire warnings about the consequences of miscegenation, and the World War saw her presenting rather confused arguments. She tended to see the First World War as a preparation for the coming

battle between Asian and non-Asian races, a view that was not uncommon in Australia at the time. In the great conscription debates her confusion was expressed in her changes of position as she let her patriotism overcome her normal logical exposition. Pearce sees this as the outcome of '...the very real imperialism and Anglocentrism that was part of Gilmore's world view'.[21]

When writing about women not of the working class, she used heavy sarcasm and ridicule.[22] In 'At a Women's National League Meeting', July 2, 1908, after treating what was effectively the workers' political opposition with 'derision and contempt', Gilmore sums up with:

> Well, there is one thing we have to be very thankful for, and that is, they don't belong to us.

Aware of her audience, she catered specifically for working class women. Her page was, after all, part of a paper written for the working class. It is a tribute to her that her page continued for so long as she was unequivocal in her attacks on male hegemony. It seems unlikely that her copy was ever 'edited', as right up until her 90's Gilmore was 'a leading Australian literary personality'. The first woman member of the Australian Workers' Union and a very highly regarded socialist reformer,[23] she enjoyed a position above normal editorial strictures in her chosen publication. Gilmore was in her late sixties when she reluctantly gave up her 'Women's Page' in 1931, relinquishing the poorly paid job which she

had begun and continued through idealism.

There is not a little irony in the fact that the next writer/editor of note is the socially mobile Connie Robertson. She was a 'snob', a social climber, one who aspired to gain the respect of the very class whom Gilmore saw as 'the enemy'. Always poor, Robertson strove to create a women's page that catered to the perceived upper class women of Sydney and New South Wales and those who were interested in their activities. Despite their opposing values, she and Mary Gilmore were good friends. The raw idealism that motivated the establishment of Gilmore's 'Women's Page' was completely absent from the 'Herald's' motivation in setting up the Thursday Women's Section. Reacting to the threat of competition from the new Daily Telegraph, the 'Herald' introduced the Thursday 'Women's Section' which Connie Robertson was to edit on 12th March, 1936. Angus McLachlan stated that,

> The whole idea of starting the Thursday section was to get retail advertising. We really cultivated Charles Lloyd Jones [the chairman of David Jones]. We'd have him down to lunch and he did give us wonderful support in that Thursday section.[24]

It was McLachlan who, nearly thirty years later when he was Managing Director, brought Charmian Clift to the Thursday Women's Section in an express effort to restore or introduce some literary content to this part of the paper. The ironical change of direction which came about with Connie Robertson's appointment and with the

introduction of the Thursday Women's Page is summed up by Valerie Lawson, herself a journalist with The Sydney Morning Herald.

> Connie's appointment was a departure from the Herald tradition of women's page editors and a recognition that the new Thursday section was purely commercially based. It chased retail ads and it won them. Many of Connie's predecessors as women's page editor were more interested in literature than journalism...Connie also had a literary background through her years in Rowe Street with AGS (A.G.Stephens, 'The Bookfellow'), but those years made her understand the importance of advertising and marketing. Her father's Bookfellow magazine had been a spectacular commercial failure, always desperate for ads.[25]

Robertson ensured the commercial success of her section and thus was given a free rein and produced 'the livliest part of the paper'. In accounting for her snobbishness, Valerie Lawson carefully details Robertson's upbringing which was physically and emotionally deprived. Her despotic father, so important to Australian letters and so neglectful of his family, had helped to turn Robertson into the perfect social journalist. Working unpaid for her father in the Rowe Street office of The Bookfellow, she was next door to the Hotel Australia, in the heart of 'social Sydney', but never a part of it. She saw her father's literary magazine fail through lack of paid advertising. Aware of her father's genius and immensely high literary standing, she nevertheless suffered poverty and saw her father suffer because of lack of appeal to the people who had money. Robertson made sure

that her publication, 'The Women's Section', never lacked for paid advertising and interested 'moneyed' readers. The 'Herald's' Women's pages became the place to be seen for what passed as Sydney 'society'. Lawson clearly presents the pattern:

> With the use of fashion photographs bought from agencies, combined with news of 400 or so women who live in Sydney's eastern suburbs or on country properties, the women's section created a fantasy world where women never had to struggle with money, men, their health or their children. No serious problems marred the lives of the fortunate 400 who spent most days worrying about their clothes, their next trip to England, and the polo ball.[26]

This was the cloistered world into which Clift's column would be brought to give back some literary content to the pages. So effective would the change be that The Women's Section never reverted to the 'social' Robertson pattern of which Lawson gives a detailed account. She also explains to what extent the section was 'advertising driven'. Robertson would be given the 'dummy layout' for the section on Monday by the advertising department. Apparently this layout was sacrosanct and the editorial content had to be fitted into the advertising. The advertisers had a great influence on what appeared in the Women's Section and on who received or did not receive 'free advertising'. She worked till late at night and had complete control over what appeared in the section. Her staff were mostly young and, as Angus McLachlan said, they felt 'great respect, perhaps even fear' for Robertson, but

not necessarily 'great affection'.[27]

Robertson continued as women's editor into the 1960's, past her own sixtieth birthday even though this was the compulsory retirement age for women with the 'Herald'. As Lawson says, she had run her section of the paper so well for over twenty years that no one had even thought about making changes.

> As a result the pages of the section remained frozen. In the 1960's, when they should have been moving forward, the women's pages continued to present ideas and values from another time.[28]

Lou Leck (then assistant to the general manager of the 'Herald') wrote a memo on 1 August, 1960, referring to Robertson's 'signs of aging', and recommending that she be retired as soon as a replacement could be found.[29]

Robertson had suffered a mild heart attack but had not informed the 'Herald'. She was replaced by two women, Margaret Vaile, who had been her most senior journalist, and Fay Patience, the fashion writer.[30]

Robertson did not 'let go' entirely of the women's section. She continued to write a weekly column, 'Getting Around', making frequent visits to her old office. Margaret Vaile found it sad to see her 'rushing in to grab an invitation'.[31] She 'badgered' to try and get a place on the team to cover the royal tour of 1963 and when this was refused she covered the tour as far as possible in her column.

When Robertson became seriously ill, early in 1964,

her column disappeared, without explanation, and she died in March, 1964. Her last recorded conversation was with her friend, the society hostess, Vera Kaldor. Robertson had never allowed Kaldor to visit her in her flat as she did not want women of a high social standing to see her own humble living conditions.[32] In her conversation she revealed what was on her mind right up to her death, 'the loss of her power, the loss of her rituals'.(ibid.)

Robertson's death allowed the changes to the Women's Section which had not been possible even after her retirement. Later that same year, Charmian Clift was to begin her weekly column. The 'Herald' had continued with two women's editors for a while but the staff 'who knew Vaile better, gravitated towards her. Patience left'.[33] Lawson sees the women's pages remaining still 'in the mould' Robertson had created until about 1966. Vaile remained in charge until 1971 when she was 'removed to the Sun-Herald women's pages'.

This then was the state of the Thursday Women's Section when Clift was brought in on 'a literary brief' to begin her weekly column. Robertson's influence and predelictions had given the pages an almost purely social bias and she had been allowed to have her own way because of her personality and the commercial success of what she did. Clift's success was due to her literary strength as she recreated the essay form for her time, place and

audience. The Clift 'persona', reaching its highpoint in the 'Herald' essays, asserted itself on the Thursday Women's Section.

The Robertson pattern of fitting the editorial section into the advertising department's 'dummy layout' remained until about 1966. By then, Clift's essays were of such importance that the advertising was fitted around the essays.[34] According to Vaile, advertisers vied for a position next to the Clift essay and some major advertising was only offered to the 'Herald' on the condition that it appeared next to the Clift essay. Vaile mentioned in particular advertising from Grace Brothers in this regard. She said that 'Grace Brothers only came in on condition that it could be wrapped around the Clift essay'.(ibid.)

Guest women columnists were tried by the 'Herald' in Clift's last year. Others were tried after Clift's death but, in Vaile's words, 'None of them measured up; none of them had Charm's magic.'(ibid.)

At precisely the same time that Clift was writing her column for the 'Heralds', Olga Masters was writing for the 'Women's News' section of the 'St. George and Sutherland Shire Leader' in Sydney, 1966 to 1969. Masters also was responding to changes in the journalistic world. Deirdre Coleman sums up this period in the Introduction to Reporting Home.

Reflecting, perhaps, the period during which

> Masters worked for the Leader (1966-69), the "Women's News" section gave quite a lot of space to the need for women to take an active role in community affairs.[35]

Coleman perforce qualifies this with an important general comment.

> At the same time, however, and the contradiction is writ large across all the papers on which Masters worked, these calls for a new assertiveness co-exist with full page features on engagement and wedding notices.(ibid.)

The very nature of the papers that Masters worked on necessarily restricted what she was able to write. She went from the 'Leader' to the 'Land', self-styled 'Australia's leading rural weekly'. It would have been difficult indeed to insert any personal writing into this dour publication. Things were different when she went to work for the 'Manly Daily' where Masters wrote under her own name. She found a new freedom here and a situation uniquely suited to her talents and interests. Coleman describes the Manly that Masters found and influenced.

> Situated on a peninsula, Manly has always had a strong local identity, and this neighbourly aspect, together with the use of by-lines, suited Masters perfectly because it gave scope to her powerful instinct for creating a readership by fossicking out events and experiences "of the kind people really like to read and with which they can identify". The writing of human interest stories afforded an important education in reader response, and her resolute determination to give pleasure to readers quickly established her as a journalist much loved by the people of Manly and nearby Warringah.[36]

It is as if Masters going in one direction met Clift coming in the other. Both established themselves as

journalists 'much loved by the people'. It was this experience that would provide the gestation period for Masters the story writer and novelist. For Clift the process worked in reverse. Her writing, particularly in her 'personal experience' books, had prepared her for the role of 'much-loved...journalist'.

Coleman points out further that at the Manly Daily Masters was 'very much her own boss', redesigning the women's page and working particularly on 'the social issues which concerned her most deeply'. Again there is a fruitful comparison with Clift's presence at the'Herald' which caused the Women's Page to be redesigned.

In his introduction to the Olga Masters Memorial Conference,[37] James Wieland underlined the importance of her journalism to Masters' literary achievement.

> But, here, in this talk of influence, I think Olga's debt may be as much to the verbal spareness imposed by journalism and a writing refined over years of gestation, as to a specific source like Hemingway... Of course, he too was a journalist.[38]

Masters broke away from what she saw as the restrictions of journalism in 1977. As she said, 'It was often frustrating to go on a news story, meet a fascinating person and be restricted to writing six paragraphs'.[39] What Masters sought, and found, in fiction was the 'bonus of being able to describe, to indulge in a little description, that you couldn't do as a journalist'.[40]

Masters left the Manly Daily to write radio and stage plays and then, in 1978, turned to short stories with an immediate and well-documented success. She thus found outside journalism what Clift had found in it. The nature of the papers she had worked for had meant that she had had to be a reporter as well as, or in conjunction with, being a writer. Still, journalism provided the 'long apprenticeship for her later writing'. Perhaps ironically, her literary success led her almost inevitably to the Sydney Morning Herald. Coleman chronicles this turn of the wheel.

> The world of journalism did not sit complacently by and watch Masters retire from the field. By January 1984 moves were afoot to secure her for the 'Sydney Morning Herald' and her first article - "Things I'd love to do before I die"- appeared in December of that year. At that time Thomas Keneally was an occasional columnist for the Herald, and it seemed to Masters that significant changes were taking place in the newsprint world, with journalists being given greater scope to experiment with different modes of writing. But the perception of change was perhaps more an indication of her own greatly altered circumstances than anything else, for she was now an established and recognised writer, sought after by one of Australia's most powerful newspapers. The fact that she looked forward to collecting her columns into a book is a measure of how far she had come from the anonymous and routine work of previous years.[41]

Masters had been a reporter first. She was only sought out by the 'Herald' after she had demonstrated her literary abilities outside the world of the newspaper. Clift's experience was similar. She was sought out by the 'Herald' because of her perceived literary achievements

and asked to write a column without being restricted by 'reporting' duties. Masters' aim of collecting her columns into bookform also parallels in part the Clift experience.

The 'distinctly unstylish' opinions of Masters appeared ironically, as Coleman says, in the 'Style' section of the 'Herald'. She was no longer reporting, she was giving '"opinion" on topics as diverse as writing, reading, art, Soviet literature, the Second World War, housekeeping and the latest fads and fashions'.(ibid.) With the possible exception of 'Soviet Literature', which relates directly to the trip undertaken by Masters in 1985, this list of topics could apply equally to Clift's column.

Clift and Masters have a different style of writing in their columns. Masters often used the third person in a wryly humorous yet personal and distinctive way. She wrote of 'the woman' and 'the man' as she related some domestic anecdote, giving a universality to the scene she was setting. In a similar situation Clift would use the first person, creating the Clift persona, 'this is me chatting to you over the garden fence'. For all this there is a similarity of tone with the two writers. It is this tone which involves the reader and creates the impression of personal contact. Both writers indulged successfully in the pithy, witty and apt closure. Sometimes they used practically identical closures. Two essays on a similar

subject illustrate the difference of approach and style but end in a similar manner with the protagonist in the kitchen.

In 'A Room of Your Own' which appeared in the 'Herald' on 24 February 1966, Clift describes a business trip she took to Melbourne. This is not 'the woman' temporarily away from home but, we are in no doubt, Clift herself. She arrives back home to a scene of squalor, no cleaning up has been done and she itemises the squalor including 'one kitchen of which the sink and every available service was stacked and heaped with unwashed plates and cups and glasses'.[42]

In 'The model of a mother', which appeared in the 'Herald' on 5 December 1985, Masters writes of 'a woman' away from home 'for a little break from the family with her sister or best friend'. She is pleased to get home and back to her own kitchen, 'Not that there would be much room around the sink for Wiping Down. No one had Wiped Up while she was gone.'[43]

Clift is dismayed at the sight of the sink full of dishes. For Masters, the sink full of dishes is almost an inevitability. Both attitudes would strike feelings of recognition and sympathy in readers. It is quite possible that Masters was influenced, even subconsciously, by the memory of Clift essays. Her son, Chris Masters, states that 'Mum would certainly have been aware of Charmian

Clift's books and columns'.[44] He also talks of 'the family's' reaction to and strong interest in the television series My Brother Jack.[45] However, these two essayists were both wives and mothers giving a version of an incident which would have been familiar to their readers.

Once again, nearly two decades apart, both writers deal with the problems of buying a special dress for an important occasion. Both are essays of sheer frustration. Both have wryly ironic though different endings. The Clift essay, 'I haven't a Thing to Wear', appeared in the 'Herald' on 9 March 1967.[46] The Masters essay, 'A new dress? It's hardly worth the wait', appeared in the 'Herald' on 7 March 1985.[47] Both essays thus appeared in March, autumn being an important setting for the Clift essay in particular. Writing about her own experiences in trying to buy a 'summer' dress on a stifling hot day in Sydney, Clift depicts the frustration of finding that all the shops have only 'autumn' or 'winter' clothes for sale. She presents a picture of herself in a recognisable situation that readers themselves would have experienced. The theme of big business making things unnecessarily difficult for the housewife is once again extended. Masters tells a story of a married woman accidentally throwing out a new expensive dress. There is no implication that the woman is Masters herself. The theme

has nothing to do with big business, Masters rather draws conclusions about the difficulties of understanding between a husband and wife

Both Clift and Masters were 'morning people', doing creative work and 'prowling the house' before any of the others were up and about. Clift's essay, 'The Magic of Mornings',[48] begins and ends in a domestic setting with a reference to her own children but digresses through reminiscences of army life to early morn in the Cotswolds, birth and death, dawn at Delphi and an evocative description of her first May Day in the Dodecanese. Speaking of early morning, Clift says:

> I like this mysterious still time before reality is quite declared.

Returning naturally to the domestic setting at the end of the essay she implies, in a self-mocking way, that for her 'There is early morning and Rest of the Day'.

Masters' essay, 'Life jogs past your window in early morning',[49] makes the same point. She evokes the suburban awakening scene within a domestic setting. Using the third person she creates a believable and identifiable scene.

> The woman dreams through a second cup of tea. She will make good use of the day, weed the rose beds, write to her sister in Scotland, go through her wardrobe and give some of her clothes to Lifeline, make a proper pudding for dinner.

While Clift has been around the world in her essay and returned, Masters stays in the domestic scene, with a little aside about the 'sister in Scotland'. She sums up:

'Early morning is over. The Rest of the Day has begun.' The title uses the second person 'your window' but this is a familiar colloquial usage and the reader is aware that she is referring to 'my window'.

Masters did not fill the gap left by Clift at the 'Herald'. Both writers had a sense of audience that enabled readers to espy a kindred spirit. Clift however, with her unique personal style, had made the weekly 'Herald' column into something that could not be copied. Masters was to find freedom and fulfilment in the novel and short story.

From this brief history of Australian women newspaper columnists it can be seen that there were Australian women newspaper columnists before and after Clift. She was by no means as overtly proselytising as Louisa Lawson or Mary Gilmore, nor commercially and socially motivated like Robertson. Nevertheless, Clift was political, she cared about social issues and took a strong stance on such political issues as Australia's involvement in the Vietnam war and the struggle for democracy in Greece and there have been few successors to her as a woman columnist. Olga Masters may be seen to have 'taken up the mantle' but the drive that led Clift to write a newspaper column led Masters to take the more general route for a writer and seek her outlet away from the newspaper world where she had learnt her craft.

Coleman explains Masters' drive in the following terms.

> Masters' sympathy with the thoughts and feelings of ordinary people was coupled with an intense curiosity, and it was this "terrifically inquisitive instinct" which made her a writer.[50]

There is at least an echo of this in Martin Johnston's explanation of his mother's drive, of which, he said:

> She was ready to look at everything and listen to anyone (indeed, she couldn't help doing either)...[51]

Answering the question of why there were 'no Philip Adamses' in the women's ranks, Elizabeth Riddell suggested recently that 'The owner picks the editor and the editor picks the columnists'. In explaining what she called the 'exception that proved the rule', Riddell said:

> 'Charmian Clift --there was a good columnist. It didn't matter whether she was male or female.'[52]

NOTES

1. Patricia Clarke, Pen Portraits, Women writers and journalists in nineteenth century Australia, (Pandora, Sydney, 1988) pp.108-9.
2. SMH archives, ' Letters, James to John Fairfax', 31 January 1865; 29 August 1865. Quoted by Clarke.
3. SMH, 26 August 1890, quoted by Clarke.
4. Louisa Lawson established her monthly publication The Dawn on 15 May 1888.
5. RAHS Journal, 1933, quoted by Clarke, p.161.
6. p.160.
7. reproduced, p.163.
8. p.170.
9. The Dawn, May, 1898, quoted by Clarke, p.167.
10. page reproduced, Clarke, p.166.
11. letter quoted by Valerie Lawson, Connie Sweetheart, (Heinemann, Melbourne, 1990) p.156.
12. cf. Lawson, p.13.
13. Sharyn Pearce, ASAL Conference paper, 1990, p.1. I am indebted to Sharyn Pearce for much of the information about Mary Gilmore's journalism. This comes from discussion and from two papers: #1, 'Fishing for Women: Mary Gilmore's Journalism in The Worker',(to be published by Kay Ferres (ed) In the Shadow of the Nineties) and #2, 'Propagating the Word: Mary Gilmore and the Women's Page', (retitled as in #1 and presented at ASAL conference, Griffith University, 1990).
14. Australasian Worker, 2 Jan, 1908, p.19, quoted by Pearce, pp.1-2.
15. Pearce, #2, p.2.
16. 2 January, 1908, p.19.
17. letter to GT from Shirley Hopkins.
18. letter to GT from Dianne Boenkendorf.
19. Pearce, paper #2, p. 3.
20. p.4.
21. p.11.
22. cf. p.9.
23. cf. entry The Modern Australian Encyclopaedia of Australia and New Zealand.
24. Lawson, pp.156-7.
25. p.153.
26. p.157.
27. p.175.
28. p.312.
29. pp.313-4.
30. Margaret Vaile was editor of the Women's Section while Charmian Clift was writing her column. She personally handled Clift's column and she has granted interviews to GT. Miss Vaile wrote the obituary that appeared with Clift's last essay on 10 July, 1969.
31. Lawson, p. 317.

32. Lawson, p.320.
33. p.323.
34. interview with Margaret Vaile, GT, 1989.
35. Deirdre Coleman, Reporting Home, (University of Queensland Press, St. Lucia, 1990) p.xxiii.
36. p.xxiv.
37. Wollongong University, 8-10 July, 1988.
38. William McGaw and Paul Sharrad, eds, Olga Masters an Autumn Crocus, (New Literatures Research Centre, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, 1990)pp. vii-viii.
39. Coleman, p. xxviii.
40. Jennifer Ellison, ed, Rooms of their Own, (Penguin, 1986) p.218. (quoted by Deirdre Coleman, 'Scrupulous Meanness...','Olga Masters conference', Wollongong, 1988)
41. Coleman, p. xxix.
42. WOCC, p.163.
43. Coleman, p.56.
44. letter to GT, September, 1990.
45. cf. chapter 'Brother Jack'.
46. WOCC, p.172.
47. Coleman, p.25.
48. SMH, 14/7/66, WOCC, p.15.
49. SMH, 31/1/85, Coleman, p.101.
50. p.xvi.
51. WOCC, p.8.
52. Panel Discussion on 'Journalism as Writing', ASAL Conference, 10 July, 1990.

XII. C O M I N G H O M E

> In total, the pieces of this collection also, I think, give a vivid and significant picture of an expatriate's first year back in a well-loved homeland. There are wry observations and wise perturbations and much good sense in these essays, and I wish I had been able to write them.[1]

George Johnston's final comment, 'I wish I had been able to write them', sums up succinctly the personal nature of Clift's essays; nobody else could have written them. In her first year with the 'Herald', Clift had published forty-eight essays in the weekly 'Women's Section'.[2] Of these essays, thirty-seven appeared in Images in Aspic, which was edited by Johnston. The collection therefore gives 'a significant picture' of her first year back.

In the foreword to Trouble in Lotus Land, her collection of Charmian Clift's essays, 1964 to 1967, Nadia Wheatley makes the case for considering the 'sixties' as running from 1965 to 1975 and paints a clear picture of Australia in 1964 when Australia was yet to move out of the 'fifties'.

> In a social sense, too, Australia in 1964 was still like the Australia of the fifties. Women were excluded from public bars and many jobs, and working mothers were still the subject of criticism and controversy. It was hard for unmarried women to get the Pill, and a decent abortion was expensive and difficult to arrange. Pubs and cinemas were closed on Sundays, certain stage-plays (or bits of them) were

> banned, and The Trial of Lady Chatterley was a prohibited import. Though European immigration had brought new ingredients to the land, the bulk of the population subsisted on meat and three veg. Yet if the food was 'Australian', little encouragement was given to the development of a local popular culture: when the film of They're a Weird Mob was released in 1966, it was the first feature film produced in Australia since The Sundowners of 1959.
>
> Thus, while potential sources of both anxiety and exhilaration existed in Australia in 1964, the overall feel was of an affluent, settled, self-satisfied society - of a society that could take to its heart, with no sense of irony, the title of Donald Horne's The Lucky Country, published late that year.

Wheatley points out that this was the Australia to which Clift returned as a nonentity in August 1964. She had 'no readership, no public persona, no "name" (and)...no immediate source of income'. But she had come home and she was offered a challenging job writing a weekly column for the Sydney Morning Herald.

Clift titled her first essay for the 'Herald', which appeared on 19 November, 1964, 'Coming Home'. This title was changed to 'Has the Old Place Really Changed?' but reverted to the original title in Images in Aspic. It can be assumed that Clift preferred the original title as she discarded the 'Herald' substitute as soon as she was in charge of production and editing. Her title is succinct, contains the emotional and nostalgic elements associated with 'home' and 'returning after an absence' and, above all, is consistent with the tone of the essay. The 'Herald' substitute is journalistic and expedient, lifting a phrase from the text for the title. The essay

appeared in the 'Women's Section' with a short explanation under the heading: 'Charmian Clift Writes For "Herald"'. There was a photograph of Clift, the new title and one 'cross-head' or subtitle, 'IMPRESSION OF SAFETY'. The first sentence was in large, bold print and there were six columns of varying length. The advertisements next to the essay advised readers on how to have 'a soft velvety skin' and how to relieve constipation. In later years the big department stores would compete for the space adjacent to her column. According to Margaret Vaile, editor of the Women's Section, Grace Brothers only agreed to advertise there on condition that their ads were 'wrapped around' the Clift column.[3]

There is a difference in the length of the essay as it appeared in the 'Herald' and in Images in Aspic. The 'Herald' version contains just under a thousand words while it is nearly twice that long in the book. It seems unlikely that the essay was 'cut' or 'sub-edited' in the normally accepted meaning of these terms. Margaret Vaile said that little if any sub-editing was done to her essays, it therefore seems likely that Clift wrote both versions and the manuscript evidence in the National Library points to this conclusion. Wheatley notes that both versions of 'Coming Home' have the 'Clift style and tone' and she also mentions that 'Charmian was well-known for her recycling of her material'. In view of all this it

seems most likely that the essay had already been written when she was given the commission to write for the 'Herald' and told of restrictions of space and just how many words to present. In the 'Herald' version the one word 'Greece' replaces the following:

> the whitewashed house at the cobbled square by the public well -- "The Australian House" the islanders called it and enthusiastically directed any and every casual Australian tourist up the lane from the waterfront as though to a national monument ("Blue door and red bougainvillea. You can't miss it. But ask anyone for the children if you are not sure,") -- ...still, one felt, tugged by uneasy thoughts of irons left on and bathtaps running, would say, daringly accepting a glass of Greek ouzo or retsina -- or more prudently refraining--, "How many years did you say? That's a long time. Why, you'd never even know the place now"
>
> And since I have returned to my native land, here but not here, still tugged by my own uneasy thoughts of shutters left unbattened against the meltemi and rainwater pipes flooding the underground cistern and whether in fact I paid Stamatis the muleteer for the last two tins of drinking water from the Sweet Wells, the statement (and it is always a statement, never a question)...

Thus a wealth of personal detail and fascinating allusion has been omitted and this is consistent with the essay's title change. The editor is more concerned with the expatriate's views on contemporary Australia.

The details of the 'Australian House' would have been of interest to the many 'house-bound' readers who avidly devoured Clift's essays. The exotic setting and cultural transplanting of the universal householder's worry, 'Have I left the gas on?' are effective in linking the primitive Island life with Australia. The commonplace nature of the

question provides a personal, conversational note within the generalisation. Clift's preoccupation with the universality of human experience and the human condition is launched here and continues through the essays. The next two pages, which tell of the Johnston family's trip back to Australia, Johnston 'jet-propelled' and the rest of the family later on a migrant ship, are also largely omitted in the 'Herald' version. This editing takes the focus away from the journey home, places it on the actual arrival and is consistent with the title change. The argument of the essay, that important facets of Australia and the Australian way of life have not really changed, remains the same.

The essay consists of a discussion of the statement 'reiterated over and over again, with assurance, and sometimes complacency: "The old place has changed quite a bit since you saw it last."' Clift begins the discussion with the rhetorical question: 'Well then -- has it?' and proceeds to argue that, in reality, the old place has not changed so much after all.

One could easily have expected that this first essay might have dealt with something inoffensive. Clift was aware of her fellowcountrymen's tendency to resent criticism of their way of life, particularly by anyone from overseas. Pre-empting criticism, she gives the personal defence of 'If Australia is 15 years changed,

then so am I'. Conceding the obvious changes to the skylines and the emergence of 'youth worship' and the 'apparent European influence', Clift summons up the Australian stereotypes of safety, plenty, prosperity, jobs for all, television, two cars, even steak for breakfast and then contrasts this with her, and the world's, 'cliche-image of my countrymen and women':

> ...the picture Australia presents of herself abroad in film, theatre, novel and migrant-snaring picture book; the lean drover, the overlander, the sundowner, the digger, the surf life-saver, the lonely man on his horse in the big big land.

Nothing has changed, the cliche-image is just as false as it ever was. There is wry originality in the phrase 'migrant-snaring picture book' while the irony is underlined with 'big big land'. This is the first essay but already Clift has a well-developed sense of audience. She is writing for an intelligent, thoughtful, though conservative reader and presenting a reasoned and developed argument.

After presenting the 'cliche-image' of Australians, Clift alludes to the traditional Australian literary idea of city versus country. One is reminded of Lawson's 'Faces in the Street' and of Paterson's 'Clancy...' in particular. Seventeen years living in London and the Greek Islands have given Clift a new perspective on her fellow Australians, enabling her to look beneath the superficialities pointed out to her by eager friends. With the

extended image of the faces '(city faces, that is, because as yet I have seen only city faces)' she is able to refer to the war and the early 1950s and then consider Australian values and take her fellowcountrymen to task for timidity and lack of originality.

> But if Australian faces **have** changed one is inevitably led to wonder whether the qualities one has always associated with Australians might not have changed also. Do such qualities thrive noticeably in an affluent and predominantly urban society? Certainly they do not appear to be reflected to any marked degree in cultural achievements as opposed to material ones. Not only techniques but also ideas seem to spring timidly from borrowed or transplanted roots.

Clift is echoing here George Johnston's concern about Australian urbanisation as he exploits it in My Brother Jack. From this point to the closure of the essay, she writes with vehemence and increasing passion. The rich alliteration of 'burgeoning and bursting' extends the 'cultural flowering' image

> 'into a real cultural and social flowering, spiky and wild and refreshing and strange and unquestionably rooted in native soil.'

From 'native soil' the argument explodes into a plea for Australian excellence with repetition of the rhetorical structure 'not only...but also' and the twelve times repeated 'Australian'. It is not mere repetition, the last group of four 'Australians' changes the rhythm and presses home the importance of Australian writing and blends with the thrust of the previous 'not only...but also' group:

> ...not just Australian actors, but Australian actors acting Australian plays written by Australian writers expressing the Australian ideas and challenges in Australian idiom.

After expressing her dreams and stirring her readers to greater effort, she brings a quieter tone to the essay. Clift says: 'Yet I do sense deeply a hope and expectation of such a natural wonder'. She talks of 'signs and portents' and in richly allusive language foresees 'a mustering of forces' leading to 'the breakthrough'. With a final urging to cultural excellence -- 'and it will not be easy to bring to birth or to sustain without dedication and brilliance' -- Clift returns to the statement she had rejected at the start of the essay:

> 'Yes, the old place has changed quite a bit since I saw it last.'

With a neat circular construction Clift has made her point. The pithy, provocative ending became an instant hallmark of her work. This was a column to think and talk about and, at times, to act upon. The Charmian Clift phenomenon arrived with a bang, not a whimper.

The second week's essay once again had its title changed. Clift's 'Social Drinking' became 'I was Agape When They Whipped Off The Wine', which again is a quotation from the body of the essay. The Herald also added an extra heading: 'NOVELIST CHARMIAN CLIFT REALISES SHE'S HOME...' The two headings substituted by the 'Herald' are 'journalistic' rather than 'literary' and the added upper

case heading is consistent with the change made for the first essay. In addition there is a perverse smugness about it with the inference that 'She's not still over there in one of those strange countries, she's back now in the real Australian world'.

The opening of this essay was also greatly changed for the 'Herald'. Some 500 words, including the whole of the 'Cotswolds pub anecdote', are cut from the beginning and other significant cuts are made in the body of the essay. As Wheatley sums up, 'the theme and the end are the same', but the passages omitted are worth examination as they appeared in full in Images in Aspic.

In the latter version, before considering Australian drinking habits, Clift ranges far and wide from the Cotswolds, through England and Europe, to Kalymnos and Hydra, making her point, in both versions, that:

> ...people, left alone, are usually so much more sensible about their own needs and pleasures than they are ever given credit for.'[4]

The scene with the children at the 'pub' in the Cotswolds exemplifies Clift's achievement. The Clift persona is perfectly at ease, chatting about her family and depicting her children as recognisably Australian children with a lovable hint of the scallywag about them. That the scene takes place in what, to an Australian reader, is an exotic location, particularly in the 1960's, adds piquancy. In an aura of romanticism the atmosphere of the

rural pub is quickly established with the 'first pint', the 'grins and nudges and winks and a delighted slapping of gaiters' and 'the misted window'. The mock pathos of the picture of the children provides humour of the familiar in the unexpected setting. This is narrative construction and story-telling on a plane which enfolds the reader with its clever use of the comfortably familiar in the charming, unthreatening exotic. The essay was written just at the end of the era when there were still Australians who could refer to England as 'home'. Clift is tapping into a selective racial consciousness with this nostalgic, almost 'chocolate-boxy' scene. She uses unfamiliar adjectives, effective alliteration and repetition to present the children who are firstly 'three forlorn waifs most wickedly abandoned' and then 'our three cunning children, hatless and coatless, sopping wet'. The parenthetical (they confessed long afterwards that they often rolled in the long grass in the apple orchard on the way) involves the reader in the whole gentle conspiracy. Children deliberately get up to mischief in order to make parents feel guilty. The apple orchard and then the image of 'noses and cheeks and fingers cherry-red with cold' establish the scene in a recognisable England in one short paragraph by combining the familiar and the comfortably recognisable exotic.

In the full version Clift also makes specific

references to Kalymnos and Hydra and her life there, drawing conclusions about male/female behaviour and cultural differences. The important paragraph that ends with Clift's conclusion that 'people left alone, are usually so much more sensible...' though common to both versions, is more effective in the longer essay because she has had time to make her case. In the newspaper column it depends on the one, perhaps purposely ambiguous statement, that 'In the Mediterranean there are virtually no secret drinkers...' and the paragraph is chopped into 'one-sentence' paragraphs.

The evidence that Clift herself at least was involved in these cuts comes from the different beginning to the Herald piece. The reference and quotation from the seventeenth century poet, Henry Aldrich, is in the Clift style. The 'ramble' through the Cotswolds and the reminiscences are replaced by the didactic:

> Since people do drink, and undoubtedly will go on drinking, in spite of dire warnings, denunciations, decrees and penalties, it would seem to be in the interest of the majority to make drinking conditions as pleasant and civilised as possible.

The point is thus made less ambiguous but also less personal. Still, so much commonsense thinking and prejudice-free articulation were quite new to the media scene in the mid-1960s. Here was a voice for rational and sane behaviour, for less, not more restriction and a clear Australian voice, not limited by excessive reverence. Here

was an Australian with an international outlook but with no apparent 'cultural cringe'.

There is a further and perhaps more puzzling omission in the paragraph on the moral authority of the church in Greece and on the ceremony of the wine boats going from Hydra to Attica at the end of summer and the reference to Dionysus, 'bringing the new religion of wine'. It is probably significant that this is only Clift's second essay for the 'Herald'. Perhaps this paragraph was not quite 'safe' enough for the 'Herald' yet. As Donald Horne says of the time, 'it was often considered bad taste to talk religion'.[5] Perhaps if this had been a later essay, it would have remained. It is difficult to know whether we are witnessing 'self-censorship' here or editorial prerogative. A later sentence about children in drinking places being, on Clift's experience, 'uncorrupted by the fact that their elders happened to be sitting around drinking', is also omitted. This would seem to be censorship of some sort, as the sentence is not long enough to have had much effect on the total length of the essay and it is an important point. The 'Herald' editorship may well have thought that they could have run into moral or legal problems by letting the sentence stand.

The essay culminates with the anecdote about Clift and Johnston's quest for a 'civilised' drink in a Sydney hotel. This is more effective in the fuller version of the

essay as it balances the tale of the Cotswold pub that began the essay. Clift gives a devastating picture of the ugliness of the hotel, 'another red brick chromium and plate glass monstrosity', and of the room in which they have their drink:

> A furtive, illicit-seeming room it was, sickly pea-green in colour, decorated with dismal ceramic ducks wallbound in a travesty of flight, lit by an innuendo of light from central pink plastic fittings (and the day outside the most tender piercing blue with a fresh little breeze and a scud of vehement cloud)...

In the penultimate paragraph, with a few brief suggestions, reminiscent of Charles Cant's observations in Walk to the Paradise Gardens, Clift outlines what could easily be achieved in transforming the terrible ugliness of the hotel.

In the closing paragraph Clift reveals a clear perception of the patterns of Australian speech. Her 'ear' had been developed by her long absence and by living in non-English speaking countries, during which her own speech pattern, or 'accent' had become 'internationalised' as evidenced by radio broadcasts she made at this time.[6] She may well have been the victim of ridicule which was often the lot of Australians in Britain.[7] The sheer banality of the barmaid's speech is presented without comment but with every nuance: 'Awfully sorry, dear', 'Gents only', 'your good lady', 'On the third', 'panelled and that' and the devastating repetition of 'nice'.[8] She is appealing to her readers' class difference with her

scathing reproduction of the conspiratorial whisper. The implied ridicule enlists the sympathy of the presumably middle class reader and allows Clift's point to be reinforced by the 'blonde waitress'.

> "Awfully sorry, dear," the blonde waitress whispered conspiratorially to my husband. "Gents only in this lounge after half-past one. If you'd like to buy your good lady another drink you'll have to go to the lounge upstairs. On the third. Quite nice it is really -- panelled and that -- and there's a nice orchestra comes in of an afternoon and plays..."

S.J. Baker, in the second edition of his work The Australian Language (1966), blames the 'insane licensing laws which, until the most recent times, have made people drink hurriedly and in discomfort',[9] for the lack of a 'civilised' attitude to drinking in Australia. The laws were changing fairly quickly but people's attitudes were slow to follow. There are echoes in the barmaid's conspiratorial whisper of the 'English butler or manservant' jargon, probably unconsciously adopted in Australian hotels and clubs in the 1960's to cope with the new licensing laws. Baker also points out that in Australia 'a girl is nine times more likely to speak in a Cultivated accent than a boy'.[10] The reported language of the barmaid represents an attempt at Cultivation.

As Clift implies, this whole attitude to social drinking is ridiculous and unnecessary in dealing with something that should be a natural part of living.[11] In the extended version of the essay, Clift presents herself

as a lovingly indulgent mother, saying of her children: 'We probably should have fetched them a crisp backhander apiece', knowing that every reader feels that she doesn't mean it. This manner of speaking enlists the sympathy of the reader by using a typically Australian method of disguising affection. As this is an early essay, it is important in creating the Charmian Clift persona which was so different from the actuality of her character.[12]

Clift's drinking and pill-taking were well-known to close friends and family by this time. Ruth Park gives a contrary picture to the fictional person Clift was constructing in her essays and suggests that she was 'writing with a hangover, half-suffocated by cigarette smoke, heart full of winter'. Of the essays, though, Park says, 'on whatever level they were written, they resonate with the reader. They communicate'.[13]

Clift's third Herald essay was on women's rights. She used the title Second Class Citizens but the 'Herald' changed it to the less controversial and ideologically neutral Australian Women. The changed title changes the whole of the essay. Ranging over attitudes in Europe, America and Australia in making her point, and dealing with the historic, genetic and social reasons for women's position as 'second class citizens', Clift discusses the changes of modernisation and then forcefully makes the

claim for equal rights for women:

> ...one wonders a little impatiently how much longer it is going to be before society faces up to the inescapable fact that women are fully-fledged members of the human fraternity, and as such entitled to participate in its economic, social and cultural life on terms of absolute equality. That such an acknowledgement is inevitable eventually is clear enough; theoretically it was made when women won for themselves the right to vote in a future that concerned them as closely as men and as directly.[14]

Debunking the 'old arguments about women's comparative physical frailty', she gives a definition of 'housework' which many women immediately adopted as their own and still refer to.

> There are some of us who find housework, although necessary, tedious, dull, repetitious, and negative in that it aspires to no end but the perpetuation of the present. It is a maddeningly dreary cycle of making things clean to get dirty again, a sort of running-on-the-spot that used (sic) up a tremendous amount of energy in not getting anywhere at all....[14]

Clift had probably only been recently introduced to housework. In the London flat she had a daily help or 'treasure' and in Greece there were maids to help with the chores. It suits her to rail against housework and at this time in the awakening of feminine consciousness it would have been a popular topic.

By now a large part of her audience would have been in agreement and had her aim merely been to entertain or reassure, she could easily have ended the essay here. Instead, with description and anecdote, she depicts different strata of Australian women, their social standing, their lifestyle and their conscious rejection of

equal status. Clift specifically describes 'the girls', a group of 'comfortable' matrons who

> convince themselves and each other that purely domestic values outweigh the values of their men, who are tiresome, inept and clubby little boys really but have to be humoured.

Clift presents here a different side of feminism. She is not a 'chanter of slogans' or presenter of 'tired old arguments'. This picture of 'second class citizens', not only content with their lot but complacently enjoying their own perceived superiority, adds depth and understanding to her argument. She is saying that if women are second class citizens, then some of the fault is their own. What could have been a tirade against male domination is in reality an attack on complacency. Clift does not excuse the unwarranted male role in the subjugation but she is encouraging women to action. This is surely a provocative essay and an example of how, in three pieces she has already used such varied subject matter and is already sensing her value as an influential commentator on contemporary mores. She has an ability to perceive 'the market', to show herself in a way her audience wishes to see her, while, as the essay on feminism suggests, setting the agenda in an important social debate.

Mary Ellman's Thinking About Women would be published in 1968, to be followed by Germaine Greer's The Female Eunuch and Kate Millett's Sexual Politics in 1970. Clift was thus at the cutting edge of the modern feminist

movement of the late 1960's[15] though she was following the tradition of forward-thinking Australian women writers such as Mary Gilmore and Louisa Lawson.

In the conclusion to the essay Clift writes a paean of praise for young Australian women, presenting them as stereotypes of the Australian image. Her perception of them is on looks only, perpetuating the prejudices that feminism was to challenge:

> ...with a sheen of clean loveliness, flocking to the universities, clear skins and shining hair and beautiful healthy bodies dressed in clothes that have as much flair and style and good taste as anything in Europe's capitals...(ibid.)

The contrast with 'the girls' is clear. By bringing in the favourable comparison with 'Europe's capitals', Clift is saying the sorts of things her audience liked to hear. This 'cultural cringe' differs from the aggressive tone of the first essay where she was passionately demanding 'Australian ideas and challenges in the Australian idiom'. But she is using a comparison that her audience would be accustomed to and would understand. She is winning readers, not alienating them, pushing their minds forward to a new concept but then drawing back to a comfortable position.

Clift can now end with the thought that many of the young women she has praised so highly will opt for safety and condemn themselves to being 'second class citizens', safe in

> ...the protective custody of some suitable man of

> sufficient income to provide the red brick haven, the shoulder to lean on, the reassuring moral authority on which she can prop herself, secure in the approbation of society, a self-elected second class citizen.[16]

Because Clift has prepared her audience, the concluding comment will not be taken as a mere criticism. Many of her readers will have recognised themselves or their close associates in the foregoing descriptions. Ideas which could have been resented have been put forward in an acceptable way. Clift has mastered her craft and established herself as a writer who will be read. As Park says:

> She thought too much, she talked copiously, she wept and laughed extravagantly, and that's exactly what gets on the page, just as it did back in the 1960s when hundreds of thousands of Sydneysiders couldn't wait for Thursday and The Sydney Morning Herald.[12]

Nostalgia is a recurrent theme in the essays. The 'Herald' essay, 'That Sentimental Journey Home' had an interesting genesis. The 'Gossip Column' of the Kiama Independent, carried the following item in its issue of November 20, 1964:

> Expected to pay a visit to Kiama this weekend is a former local girl whose name has become known around the world.
> Who is she?
> Sorry, but I'm going to leave you to gnaw your fingernails over it until Tuesday when we hope to publish an interview and photo.

The article and photo were published in the 'Kiama Independent' on November 24, 1964 under the heading:

> "SENTIMENTAL" VISIT BY FAMOUS AUTHOR
> MAY BUILD "RETREAT" AT KIAMA.

The very interesting interview (see appendix) is actually an interview with both Clift and Johnston and it provides an insight into their plans and aspirations at this early stage of their return to Australia. Johnston in particular was full of praise for the 'charm of Kiama'. A footnote to the interview stated:

> The Independent shortly will publish a special article which Charmian Clift has undertaken to write for it.

That article, entitled 'Home Town Revisited', appeared in the 'Kiama Independent' on Friday, December 11, 1964 on the front page, accompanied by a photo and a note:

> Kiama-born Miss Clift recently paid her first visit home after 17 years during which she has travelled widely and won fame as an author.
> In this article, written specially for the "Independent", she describes her reaction to her homecoming.

With a keen sense of audience, Clift produces a short, sentimental, sensual and very personal evocation of her home town. She mentions her father's name in the first sentence, and repeats 'Kiama' in the first few paragraphs. Her description of 'Kiama air' illustrates her ability to catch and describe a concept.

> But it was incredibly good to breathe Kiama air again, and it is special -- something between tangy and sweet, a mixture of kelp and clover, rich earth and sea-brine'.

Clift includes nostalgia for cricket and football matches and maypole dances where she ' never ever - alas - was

chosen May Queen'. Her description of herself here runs somewhat counter to the picture of self-confidence in young Australian women that she built up in the 'Second Class Citizens' essay. This is unrestrained nostalgia and the version for her local paper at least holds no criticism of her fellow townspeople. She almost certainly endears herself to the local readers with her comment that 'nobody looks a day older than they did seventeen years ago, which was the last time I was a resident. 'The idea of Kiama air being worth 'a quid a whiff' is alluded to. 'You don't look a day older' is an accepted greeting for acquaintances meeting after a long time. Over-riding all this is Clift's unexpressed wish that things could be as they once were for she has had a difficult time for seventeen years and she is seeing or trying to see her home town and her old friends as they were. This tendency in Clift will accelerate in the last year of her life and be evident in the POL articles which will be examined later. She concludes with a comment about seeing the world and coming back home.

After changing the title from 'Home Town Revisited' to 'Youth Revisited', Clift rewrote the piece for the 'Herald' where it appeared on January 7, 1965 under the title 'That Sentimental Journey Home'. She had thus removed the word 'home' from the Kiama version and the 'Herald', probably not even knowing of the existence of

the original version, had replaced it. The 'Herald' version is longer and much changed but it is still essentially the same essay. Clift's father's name is omitted and there is no mention of 'Kiama', as she talks of 'a sentimental pilgrimage to my birthplace'. The description of Kiama, obviously not necessary for the previous article, is perceptive and evocative. She uses the comparison with other areas to continue her campaign against 'the Great Australian Ugliness' and gives reasons why 'her' town has escaped the ugliness.

> My home town is small as towns go, three thousand people perhaps, and for some reason industry has passed it by - or never quite reached it - for to the north there are tall forests of chimneys belching progress and around them the fibro scabs of the housing developments are creeping out over the paddocks.[17]

Clift's style is well illustrated in this passage. She softens the cliche 'passed it by' with the added 'or never quite reached it'. Her picture of 'tall forests of chimneys belching progress' shows a juxtaposition of the incongruous. Tall forests summon up a picture of greenery, peace and fresh unpolluted air, so by referring to the chimneys as 'tall forests' she ironically emphasises the contrast between the polluting chimneys and the forests that they have necessarily replaced. 'Belching progress' is an economical image, containing its own comment. The chimneys belch out their pollutants in the name of progress.

The personification of the 'fibro scabs' 'creeping out over the paddocks' represents fully involved subjective writing. Fibro, that most Australian of cheap building materials, was the substitute for the brick, sandstone, basalt and natural timber with which even the working class homes of Clift's youth had been built. Much of the 'Australian Ugliness' of the post World War II era came from the extensive use of this cheap drab building material. Whole townships of so-called 'duration houses' had been built with fibro during the war on the understanding that they would be demolished as soon as the war ended. The housing shortage of the forties and fifties meant that these sub-standard dwellings remained in use. State Housing Commissions used fibro extensively to provide for the homeless. The 'better' suburbs of major cities had 'no fibro' clauses in their building regulations. A terrible irony arose subsequently from the discovery that the asbestos, which was a main constituent of fibro, was a health hazard, in particular to the tradesmen who worked with it. 'Scab' then seems particularly appropriate although, no doubt, Clift intended a reference to the appearance of the fibro buildings as they appeared on the paddocks like a blight or sore, combining unhealthiness with the revolting ugliness of their appearance. Similarly 'creeping out over the paddocks' conveys the insidiousness with which beauty is replaced by

ugliness in the name of progress. The image lingers long after it is read.

Clift's social criticism is here aimed at the mindless pursuit of 'progress'. The contrast between her own home town and the 'creeping fibro scabs' is stark. She began the essay with the reminiscence of her father saying that (Kiama) air 'would be worth a quid a whiff'. The image of the factory chimneys is made more effective by contrast. Later in the essay the 'fibro scabs' are to be contrasted with the buildings of Kiama, 'solid dignified examples of late nineteenth century architecture -- nothing temporary here...'.

In the shorter article for the local paper Clift did not refer to the industry to the north of the town. Her comment on progress was contained in one sentence:

> Selfishly, also, I deplore the new housing developments, but that is only because they lessen the range of choice for myself.

By beginning the sentence with 'selfishly', Clift makes her point without appearing too critical of 'progress'. In the longer essay for the larger audience, she does not hesitate to criticise.

There are many concepts in the next paragraph of the longer version which, although it is certainly ironic, identifies and in part appeals to the xenophobia of Australians.

> Because of its lack of any big industry it has failed to attract migrant settlers, and the sturdy local names -- English, Irish and Scotch -- are

> untainted by unpronounceable foreign terminations, as its way of life is untainted by unmentionable foreign habits.(ibid.)

'Migrant' is cleverly contrasted with 'English, Irish and Scotch'. These people were obviously migrants too, but from an earlier period so that they would have thought of themselves as pioneers. 'Migrants', as Clift knows only too well, implies 'post-war migrants, probably from Central or Southern Europe, people who do not have English as their main language'. Migrants are people who came to Wollongong to work in the steel mills and live in the 'fibro scabs' of places like Cringila which adjoin the mills. Kiama is far enough away to allow its residents to feel superior. The passage is very racist, clearly intended for a middle-class Anglo-Celtic audience but there is irony as well. The repeated 'untainted' and the use of 'unmentionable' in this context represent a somewhat muted comment about xenophobia.

There is no irony in the actual physical description of Kiama and surroundings which follows. Clift almost wallows in a sensual and nostalgic description of the area in which she grew up.

> From the blue bulk of the mountains to the blue expanse of the Pacific the hills tumble down, round hills plotted with fields, veined with old stone walls of convict origin, fuzzed with lantana and crowned with crests of cabbage palm and umbrellas of Moreton Bay fig ("do you remember," they said, "how we went rabbit-shooting on Saturday afternoons?").
>
> The town is on the sea, where the hills end their tumble in purple bluffs that separate casual mile-long sweeps of salmon pink sand frilled with surf and starred with aloe clumps. ("Do you remember," they

> said, "racing over the sand-dunes after school? Digging out the lagoon? Worming at low tide?") (ibid.)

She continues in the same vein, description and nostalgia interspersed with the personal comments and questions of the locals in parenthesis. The repeated 'Do you remember?' gives a rhythm to the descriptive passages. Then, as the nostalgia becomes over-indulgent, the description shifts to another register, another level of penetration. She says: 'But these are superficial things. The spirit is the same,' and then she gives her version of that spirit:

> Prosperous without being smug, placid without being somnolent, a summer resort now but without a touch of scabbiness. It is beautiful enough to be a national monument, except that it is too intensely -- although quietly -- alive...[18]

Clift has thus written her 'tribute' to her home town. All Kiama residents, her audience in this case, would feel smug after reading it. In the wider circulated version she omits the comment about never ever being - alas - chosen as May Queen. The ending is subtle, wry and 'two-edged'. The condescension is gentle, though necessary, as Clift, still in nostalgic mood, breaks with her hometown.

> "Do you remember," they said, "how you always swore you'd get out of this town and go and see the world?"
>
> "Yes," I said. "I remember. Do the kids these days want to get away too?"
>
> "Some of them," said one of the gathering, and looked at me with a sort of quizzical aloofness, as at one who had passed long ago out of their community

> and understanding. "Funny, isn't it? I mean, there's everything here."[19]

The conclusion to the shorter local article deals with the same scene and the same sentiments but in a different manner and without the condescension or irony.

> I can remember so well (and several people reminded me of this) that as a child I used to swear that I would get out from that small town and go and see the world.
>
> It would be untrue to say that I am sorry I did. But I am so glad to have had the opportunity to come back.

Clift demonstrates here her sense of audience and her appropriateness of style. For the local involved audience she uses indirect speech in recording the conversation. For the wider detached audience Clift uses direct speech and continues the conversation to arrive at a different conclusion without making a direct comment but leaving a clear inference. Having longed nostalgically for her home town and for the life she once had there, she finds that she has grown apart from the people she grew up with; their worlds are different.

There is anecdotal evidence[20] that one former schoolmate said to Clift on her visit to Kiama: 'You're so lucky, travelling the world and seeing all those marvellous places.' To which Clift is said to have replied: 'No, you're the lucky one. You stayed here.' There is an element of politeness in Clift's reply but also truth in the light of Clift's situation at this time. The Johnstons had been feted since their return to Australia and they

both had some status as writers but little security. They suffered bouts of ill-health, brought on at least in part by their excessive drinking and smoking. Clift had to work to support the family, Johnston would soon be readmitted to hospital and they both had to struggle to 'keep up appearances'. She must have looked wistfully at her old friends and their 'establishment' comfort.

The Last Magic appeared in the 'Herald' on 4th March, 1965 under the rather prolix title of 'All That Goes into the Magic Of a Good Wine', which missed the point of the essay. Clift was using 'magic' in the sense of 'a magical procedure or rite'.[21] The 'Herald's' usage is more prosaic. There seemed to be an editorial reluctance at this time to accept the sophistication of their columnist, for the essay does not deal with 'What goes into the magic of a good wine', it is about 'the grape magic'. Clift begins briefly with the fact that it has lately been harvest 'pressing time, which is the best of all times for those whose business is with wine'. From here she links the Australian experience with its 'northern roots' and explains what she understands by 'magic': 'a world and a cycle apart, the grape magic renews itself.'

In this essay, once again, she brings her personal experience to bear and nudges her fellowcountrymen and women to relax their insularity just a little more.

It has been my fortunate lot to have come by a

> love of wine naturally and to have lived in places where people regard wine as being one of the natural pleasures of life, like singing, or gossip, or going to sleep in the heat of the day.

For Australia in the mid sixties, this was a fairly outspoken comment from a writer in the Women's Section of a respectable newspaper. 'Seedy' wine bars and 'plonk' were still part of the Australian perception of wine-drinking in this era. As Sidney Baker says of Australian attitudes to drinking historically and in the years leading up to the mid 1960s:

> Australians have always been enthusiastic if not particularly intelligent drinkers...In the brief passage of time between mid-1939 and now [1966], our population has grown by about 63 per cent.; in the same period, our consumption of beer and wines has jumped 200 per cent. and our consumption of spirits only slightly less. A report from the Brewers' Society of Britain in 1964 said that we had become the world's third largest beer drinkers (after Belgium and West Germany)...
>
> Australia is capable of producing excellent wines, yet of these the average member of the public knows little. Often his acquaintance extends no further than port, sherry and muscat -- heavy drinks, often fortified, sold cheaply, an easy means of getting drunk quickly and at a minimum of expense -- and, as some indication of our oenological barbarity, various fizzy drinks including a concoction called sparkling sweet sherry.[22]

Clift writes as the expatriate that she is and thus is able to adopt the attitude of a recently arrived migrant, encouraging more enlightened attitudes to drinking.

> It is good to find Australia tending a little closer towards that happy state of affairs, as it should, because its wines are excellent and its people hedonistic enough to enjoy them unselfconsciously.

It is a truism that from the outside a society, like

so many other things, looks different. Seventeen years' absence has necessarily changed her perception so that those things that have altered will be obvious and those that have anachronistically remained the same will be apparent. In addition, Clift has her experiences in London, Europe and the Greek Islands with which to compare her native Australia. As a journalist or weekly columnist, she effects a distillation of her impressions, the impressions of one who has been away at a time of change. Clift thus exploits the dichotomy of the migrant's view and the native Australian's view. She is however writing in the main for a sophisticated middle class audience. The migrants coming to Australia at that time were often the displaced and the homeless and many were non English speakers. Their perception of the new country would necessarily be different from hers.

Clift's new perception of her fellow Australians is evident in the essay 'Images in Aspic', which appeared in the 'Herald' on 18 March, 1965 and gave its title to the collection. It was a title that the 'Herald' did not change and an essay that remained unchanged in publication. Two cross-heads were added: 'Stupendous Beaches' and 'Couldn't Go Wrong'.

In 'Images in Aspic', Clift makes the important transition from 'you Australians' to 'we Australians', indicating that she is not so much thinking of herself as

a recently returned expatriate any more. She starts with the news that two new 'big foreign feature films' are to be made in Australia,

> The one about drovers. The other -- still in the stage of preliminary reconnaissance -- about a kangaroo.
> Oh dear...

In what seems to be a particularly apt image, Clift whimsically talks of 'our Alice in Wonderland film circles (shrunk-and-still-shrinking: Oh why did they eat the wrong side of the mushroom?)'. The Australian film industry seems frightened to expand. She ridicules the whole outdated 'drover, kangaroo' attitude and with a list of possible subjects for films, positively points out what she feels our film people are missing.

> It is a strange country, an exciting country, an original country, from the stupefying immensity of its scale to the most delicate of its nuances.

Speaking first as the outsider looking in and aware of the influences affecting the fabric of Australian society, Clift sums up the situation.

> Ever since I have been back here I have been conscious that Australians caught in international crosscurrents of ideas and manners and fashions, twisted about by re-assessments of their own old myths, bewildered by elusive and changing standards, are desperate to be redefined.

She now makes the shift from third person to first person and forcefully gives a lead.

> But it is for us to define ourselves, to reveal ourselves unselfconsciously in our many facets, before the aspic of the overseas conception sets

> firmly around the jolly swagman and the overlander and condemns us to be served up forever in jellied garnish.

Clift stresses the point that 'Image-making could be more important than profit-making'. She shows a grasp of the film industry's problems and realities, referring to the making of television and film commercials and 'quality sponsored documentaries'. She is urging courage and boldness, something greater than the kangaroo and the jolly swagman. Her closure, as happens so often, brings the reader back to the everyday world as she relates a conversation with a Sydney taxi-driver who turns out to be 'an actor...Resting'. The Clift persona thus remains accessible to her readers and the 'tagline', 'an actor... resting', becomes an easy conversational point of entry to the film industry and its problems.

On 1st April, 1965 appeared Clift's essay about Sidney Nolan, 'The Rare Art of Inspiring Others'. There was no change to the title or the text in this essay which nowhere actually mentions Nolan by name, although when it was reproduced in Images in Aspic, Cedric Flower's illustration whimsically drew together some of the aspects of Nolan's work. The three women associated directly or indirectly with this essay, Pat Flower, wife of the illustrator, Cynthia Nolan, wife of the protagonist, and Clift herself were creative people who all took their own lives when one would have assumed they still had much

creative potential.

Clift's editor at the 'Herald', J.D. Pringle, had written Australian Painting Today in 1963. He was aware of Nolan's importance in the Australian art world and, speaking of his work, he said:

> Nolan's brilliant images succeed one another like a film by the great Russian director Eisenstein. They have a cinematic quality. (Stills of his Kelly series made an excellent film.)[23]

Listing Nolan's achievements in the 'Bibliographical Notes', Pringle refers to his CBE 'for his services to Australian art' in 1963 and to the fact that he is represented 'in principal Australian State Galleries, Tate Gallery, London, and Museum of Modern Art, New York.'

Clift writes a very personal tribute to Nolan. She begins with creative people in general, refers to the many times the Nolans and the Johnstons' paths had crossed, and praises Nolan as one with 'the rare art of inspiring others'. The occasion for this essay was Nolan's visit to Sydney and a shared dinner. He had just returned from Antarctica for an exhibition of his paintings at David Jones. Later, in 1967, when Nolan had a retrospective art exhibition at the New South Wales Art Gallery, Clift was involved again and wrote another essay, 'Uncrating Mr. Nolan', although this time she used the artist's name throughout the text.

Clift establishes at the start of the essay just what she means by creative and great people, then goes on to

establish Nolan in the category of 'great'. Her beginning is personal with a wry parenthetical observation which would appeal particularly to an Australian reader.

> Most of my adult life has been spent in the company of so-called (and sometimes self-called) creative people. That is to say, writers, painters, actors, poets, sculptors, potters, musicians -- established, hopeful, would-be, deluded, people swimming hard in deep waters and people splashing pretentiously in the shallows.[24]

She then progresses from the image of the deep and shallow waters, describing creative people as 'a fairly zany lot' and introducing a poignant note with the observation that they were

> Quite often sad people too, since there is no defeat more bitter than that of aspiration by inability. (ibid.)

After sketching the Johnstons' meetings with the Nolans over the years she shows how important Nolan's inspiration had been to her.

> Our encounters with this man have looped like an arabesque through fifteen years, several countries, and a whole set of different circumstances... He and his wife had just discovered Spain, and he talked about hot rocks and burning light...

In an evocative passage Clift describes the time together on Hydra, ending with a touching confession.

> Later, when we had found our own hot rocks and light in Greece, he came one winter to share them with us....I don't think he was really very well known even then, although he was on his way, and one knew, unquestioningly, that the way was going to be far. I used to have a queer, shamed compulsion to touch him for luck....
>
> We had been reading Robert Graves' Greek Myths then, and Gray Walter's Living Brain, and had passed these on to the artist for his interest...

In his biography of Nolan, Brian Adams refers obliquely to this time when discussing Nolan's Gallipoli film Toehold in History. He writes:

> Appropriately the script had been written by George Johnston, who had been part of the paintings' inception during those halcyon days on Hydra ten years before.[25]

Clift, Johnston and Adams have constructed their own realities around and through Nolan. The artists are inextricably enmeshed through their relationships with each other. Clift elaborates on what his presence meant to them on Hydra.

> I do know that we all thought better for his presence among us, talked better, actually worked better. "On with the dream," he would say, and things like that never sounded pretentious coming from him, because he would grin mockingly and say, "They'll get your kidney fat anyway." To one pessimistic Irish writer he said, "You want to fly? Then jump up and bloody well fly!" Once I said, "Why wish for the moon?" And very firmly he replied, "Why not? For heaven's sake why not?"

The essay ends in Sydney as Nolan and the Johnstons 'guzzle' lobster mornay 'in a penthouse room with a breathtaking view from its wall of windows', a scene which Clift sets in contrast with 'Papathanasiou's taverna and the lamplight flickering and the wind howling outside, and the dreams we had had then'. This is powerful writing as Clift defuses any pomposity from the scene in the penthouse room with the breathtaking view by use of the verb 'guzzle'. Papathanasiou's taverna is romantically evoked with lamplight, howling wind and young dreams.

Another essay of particular significance written during her first year back in Australia was 'A Death in the Family' which appeared on 17 June, 1965 and was written immediately on hearing of the death of her brother, Barre. Sunk in grief and self-recrimination at this unguarded time of grief, Clift reveals her innermost emotions. We are able to see very clearly the importance of her childhood and her deep attachment to her brother. There is here a defiance, a pride, continued from childhood and still expressed with a remarkable vehemence.

> We could swim like fish and fight like tigers, we could walk a post-and-rail fence on our bare horny feet like acrobats, we could skin a rabbit as well as shoot one, we could gut a fish or tar a canoe... We were an alliance, wordless but unquestioned, against the world of adults and authority. We had, as far as we knew, no limitations whatever.[26]

There is an egotism and a defiance in the essay about Barre's death which never seemed to leave her. From leaving school early, through 'Pix' covergirl, love affairs, unconventional motherhood, unique and exotic lifestyle, to death by her own hand at the height of her popularity as essayist and 'personal confessor' to middle Australia, Clift defied convention.

The 'alliance, wordless but unquestioned, against the world of adults' was something that Clift was to remain true to for the rest of her life, even though she lost her brother as accomplice. She tried to live her life as if there were indeed "No limitations whatever". One sees very

clearly in this quotation a bonding of the brother and sister, the true depth and passion of which is only allowed to surface completely here at the time of death, when her normal defensive protection is relaxed. The essay concludes with a poignant passage.

> All I have is an aloe cubby, and a skinny big-headed boy with yellow eyes looking phosphorescent in Wild Woodbine smoke, and two names and a date carved with a rabbit-skinning knife into an aloe spear that has probably long since decayed into the mat of decaying fibre feet thick, where ants and spiders and sometimes lizards crawl. And I hope that children still crawl in there and talk of grandeur to come, or even doubt the possibility of it, but carve their names on a new spear. My brother would have liked that.

This essay on death is revealing in many ways, not least in its lyrical 'paganism' where Clift links the death of her brother with the decayed and decaying forms of nature. In her own mind she remained defiant, carrying the "us and them division" of her early years into adulthood. This is something her readers recognised in the essays, feeling that she was on their side against the forces of impersonal authority. Barre, to her way of thinking, gave in by taking the only menial job available to him in that Depression world into which he emerged with his Honours Leaving Pass. She raged at him, frustrated by his acceptance and, in the process, revealing much about her drive.

> I lost him somewhere there, obsessed as I was by my own feverish impatience to get on to the first prizes that he didn't seem to care about.

The remaining essays are in the main a showcase for Clift's gently iconoclastic and very personal style. They provide a fresh and witty view of life in Australia, jumping week by week from the general to the specific, from the serious to the trivial, establishing Clift and building a large number of regular and devoted readers.

'The Joys of a City', with title changed to the rather cumbersome and condescending 'The Sheer Joy and Luxury of Living in a City' by the 'Herald', is a good example of a standard Clift essay of this time. Beginning with Dr. Johnson's quotation "The man who is tired of London is tired of life", she extends its meaning to include the major cities of the world as a preamble to eschewing the popular 'sixties' dream of living in the suburbs or in semi-rural surroundings.

> Rat race, petrol fumes, poisoned air, population explosion and all, cities are mostly filled with people who really like cities.

Clift gives personal details of well-meaning friends trying to find the Johnstons a house in the suburbs, relates the primitive nature of life on the island and confesses without shame:

> To begin with, it is so very nice to be comfortable again when one hasn't been really comfortable in years.

She relates anecdotes of unexpected city adventures she has had and then indulges in that stylistic device of the list in which image is piled upon image, often in

contrasting juxtaposition and with skilful use of alliteration, to create a kaleidoscopic picture of life in a city.

> I love first nights, last nights, shady bars, sooty spires, glittering parties, stalls of flowers, overheard conversations, beggars who play music, balloon sellers, the backstage of every theatre, delicatessens, subways, the new beauty of TV towers, students' demonstrations, mouldy museums, lights smeared on wet pavements, brass name-plates, glass offices, air terminals, famous people glimpsed in hotel foyers, sailors' pubs, art openings, pretentious intellectuals, tarts in tight dresses, lovers in parks, and in parks, too, the Sunday soapboxes, empty early morning streets, eccentrics, brass bands, ambulances, police cars, fire engines.
>
> Only in cities can one live in daily expectation of the unprecedented. That, I think, is why I love them so much...

The above list of romantic, ephemeral and capricious topics beginning with 'I love...' gives some insight into her nature and talent. The piling up of the images creates excitement and pace, a feeling of being in the centre of things. It was to some extent the weekly 'expectation of the unprecedented', presented in a uniquely personal style, that accounted for the 'Charmian Clift phenomenon', particularly in that first year 'back home'.

Images in Aspic was a selection of part of the first year's output of essays. To get a full picture of the first year back home it is necessary to examine the essays that were not thus selected. These have been made more accessible by Nadia Wheatley's collection Trouble in Lotus Land and they are examined in the next chapter: 'Out of Aspic: Not Culled'.

N O T E S

1. GJ, Introduction to I in A, p.12.
2. There was no 'Women's Section' over the Christmas New Year period and none in Easter week, 1965.
3. interview with GT, 1989.
4. I in A, p.21.
5. Donald Horne, The Lucky Country Revisited, p.59.
6. ABC archives. I listened to several tapes of interviews with Clift after her return to Australia in 1964. At Kiama I played a tape to a group of High School children of Clift talking about her childhood. The pupils wanted to know why she sounded 'posh' and 'different' if she was from Kiama as they were.
7. I spent six months in England with my family in 1969. We found that our 'Australian accent' inevitably attracted comment in England, usually unfavourable. For instance, the humour of Bill Kerr in the very popular 'Hancock's Half Hour' derived almost entirely from the fact that he spoke with a 'broad Australian ' accent.
8. There is literary allusion here to T.S. Eliot's The Wasteland, though the accent is from the other side of the world, the social setting is similar.
9. S.J. Baker, The Australian Language,(Currawong, Sydney, 1966) p.225.
10. p.455.
11. I can certainly remember being spoken to in that vein in a Sydney inner-city hotel during that period.
12. Evidence that we are indeed dealing with a 'persona' comes from the extended 'Chester Eagle interviews'. George's brother Jack Johnston and his wife Patricia were scathing about Charmian as a mother. Jack was quite blunt about it: "Well, she wasn't a good mother, that's number one." Patricia made the point that young Jason was sent to Victoria to live with their eldest daughter's family and, according to Patricia, neglected by Clift during the two years he stayed with them. Jack and Patricia also spoke about the terrible fights between Clift and Johnston, Clift's heavy drinking and even a fight where they broke a bottle and gouged one another. (Chester Eagle tapes, Jack and Pat Johnston, TRC 821, 29.7.1980, tape 1 of 4)
13. Ruth Park, 'Nothing But Writers', The Independent Monthly, September, 1989, pp. 32-3.
14. I in A, pp.26-7.
15. cf. Horne, p.97. The first women's liberation groups were formed in Australia in Adelaide and Sydney in 1969.
16. I in A, p.30.
17. p.36.
18. p.37.
19. p.38.
20. Interviews with several Kiama residents, contemporaries of Clift. GT.
21. The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary.

22. Baker, The Australian Language, p.225-6.
23. J.D. Pringle Australian Painting Today, (Thames & Hudson, London, 1963) p.54.
24. I in A, p.75.
25. Such is Life, p.178.
26. I in A, p.116.

XIII. NOT CULLED: OUT OF ASPIC, i.

> And as the sixties proper began to gather momentum, as trouble began to ruffle the introspective calm of lotus land, Charmian Clift was to be able through her column to support not only her family, but the various causes that erupted.[1]

There were 36 'Herald' essays chosen from the homecoming year to appear in Images in Aspic. It was not actually a full year as the last chosen essay had been published as early as 9th September, 1965; a full year of being home, but only ten months of writing for the 'Heralds'. Of the seven essays that were omitted, two would later appear in The World of Charmian Clift. In his foreword to Images in Aspic George Johnston described the collection as 'culled' from the 'Herald' essays of the first year. For The World of Charmian Clift, Johnston again used the word 'culled' to describe the selection process but added: 'Some of her best pieces I have had reluctantly to discard on the grounds of topicality'. In Trouble in Lotus Land, published in 1990, Nadia Wheatley featured the five 'culled' essays.

> These topical pieces, which Johnston felt would quickly prove ephemeral, were in many cases the more controversial, the more overtly political ones. While Johnston's collection shows Clift at her lyrical

> best, and while it includes some of the more passionate pieces, Johnston could not foresee a situation in which the value of the topical pieces would be enhanced by the fact that they represented an immediate reaction to the events and anxieties of the sixties.

This chapter examines the five essays that appeared in the 'Herald' up to September 1965 and were not reprinted in the Johnston selections.

'The Creeping Towers', 13th April, 1965, deals with themes that Clift often returned to: Australian architectural ugliness and destruction of the old, beautiful and nostalgically charming and their replacement by the merely functional and impersonal. Her concern in this area pre-dated the Green ban movement by at least five years.[2] In this essay she uses as a leit-motif the line from an early Auden poem.

> ...that has always given me those little eerie prickles at the back of the neck, evoking as it does women in dark glasses, humpbacked surgeons and the scissors man. But the most eerie verse of all ends in a casual and mocking reminder to complacency that 'we've been watching you over the garden wall for hours'.

Clift finds in that line 'something of the same quality as Kafka, where the inimical is always so (apparently) ordinary'. She then evokes her own Kafkaesque quality with a clear description of Mosman, where she was living at the time, and the creeping invasion of the cranes and the towers.

> Anyway I was walking through the ordinary orderly streets of our suburb the other day, revelling in the crisp blue and the good tang of air, when I looked up and saw--I really saw for the first time--how many

> cranes were swinging and dipping on towers of apartments and home units rising to completion high above the rambling, snug domestic rooftops of tile and slate that I have accepted until now as the visual image of these particular streets.
>
> 'We've been watching you over the garden wall for hours.' And days. And weeks. Even months.

The above passage reaches to the heart of Clift's style: the personal subjective nature of her writing, the pictures of place, colour and atmosphere, the conjured up image of cosiness or nostalgia in the adjective 'snug' used to describe the otherwise unexceptionable 'domestic rooftops of tile and slate' and the temporal expansion of 'And days. And weeks. Even months'.

Clift personifies an 'empty old mansion on the street corner just up from us', deliberately enlisting audience sympathy for the old-fashioned and the past and arousing a certain terror of the new and unknown. Having evoked the reader's feeling for the 'grand old place', she then extends the personification to include the machines and describes the attack on and destruction of the old house.

> Then one night huge yellow machines crawled and lumbered and shuddered down from the arterial road and under a battery of arc lights nosed in to attack the old house. It held out for a few days against the rock drills and intermittent cannonades of gelignite. Then it collapsed in an undignified tangle of lathe and plaster and patterned wallpaper showing bright oblongs where pictures had hung once and light fixtures dangling skew-whiff from moulded plaster wreaths of flowers, and the yellow machines moved in to erase all trace of it forever and to gouge deep into the ancient rock on which it had stood to lay foundations for the tower that is now replacing it.

She had already referred to <u>The Day of the Triffids</u>

and how 'it was perfectly all right, because authority had them under control. Until one day they were out of control'.

The closure to the essay recalls the Auden quotation and involves the reader. When she says: 'Have a look over YOUR own garden wall some time', Clift is hinting at a type of conspiracy. As she is on the side of the 'citizens' and against the bureaucrats and faceless developers, her readers who would be more likely to be citizens than bureaucrats or developers, have found in her a champion, one who speaks to them in a personal way, has the same problems and sees the world as they do.

In 'The Joys of a City', however, published just four months earlier in February, her posture was rather different as she listed amongst her litany of 'loves': 'the new beauty of TV towers' along with 'glass offices' amd 'air terminals'. She may have been well able to hold these two views at one time and her opinion may have changed but it does seem that her sense of audience was the over-riding consideration in this change of posture, given the strength of the change. Nadia Wheatley describes how Clift's readership had expanded to include 'working-class women, businessmen, left-wing Greeks, radical students and the upper echelons of the Black and White Ball committee', but she includes 'the solid middle-class women whom the Women's Section was mainly aimed at'.[2]

Clift was a romantic and her audience would have enjoyed the romanticism of 'The Joys of a City'. The city is different from one's home environment, even when one lives in the inner city or near suburbs. She had concerns for quality of life and 'The Creeping Towers' would find sympathy with the people she was writing for.[3] The Charmian Clift phenomenon came about because she was not a clinician or an objective social commentator, but an essayist who had mastered her craft, knew whom she was writing for and wrote what they wanted to read.

'What Price Rubies?', 27th May, 1965, is a spirited, historical, literary and personal defence of what was known at the time as 'the working wife'.

> Working wives and working mothers were still very much the subject of media scrutiny and public attack in the mid-sixties. In order to understand the radicalism of this piece, it must be remembered that New Wave Feminism didn't begin to reach Australia till about 1970.[4]

As mentioned in the previous chapter, 'Coming Home', Clift followed the tradition of early Australian women columnists who also wrote about and exposed male prejudice and sexism in society. By using the essay form in a mass circulation newspaper to reach a wide audience she was breaking new ground in method of presentation and was in the forefront of a movement which was to re-examine women's role in society and to attempt to redress gross inequalities of labour and perception. Clift's approach to the subject is individual and her treatment is relentless.

Beginning with a biblical quotation from Proverbs, she extols the virtues of women of previous generations as she describes their dedication, skills and perseverance, drawing particularly on the example of her own grandmother and mother. She then gives that memorable description of housework as 'tedious, dull, repetitious and negative' that so many housewives, caught in the cycle, were to find liberating by its very articulation. As Lisa Tuttle points out in The Encyclopedia of Feminism:

> Often perceived as trivial, housework has been recognized by feminists as a key theoretical problem, one which must be solved if equality between women and men is ever to be possible.[5]

Referring to the idea of 'contracts for housework' which became popular in the late 1960s, Tuttle also mentions Pat Mainardi's paper 'The Politics of Housework' which appeared in 1970. Clift was thus dealing with a problem at a time when it was being seriously argued about internationally.

Although Australia had traditionally looked to Europe, particularly Britain as a role-model for social behaviour, in the post-war period of the 50's and 60's the focus had turned to America. Donald Edgar sees that Australian society was however always more male-dominated than these societies.[6] In support of this statement he quotes the following figures for married women in the workforce early in the 1960s:

Australia: 18.7%
United States: 31%

Great Britain: 32%
France: 31%

The Australian figures came from the 1961 census. By the 1971 census, after a decade of dramatic social change for Australia, the figure for Australian married women in the workforce had risen to 32.7%, a figure comparable with the rest of the 'western' world. Clift presents as fact the liberation of the housewife-mother:

> when the youngest goes to school, and she is liberated, if she so desires it, to take up an interrupted career, to begin a new one, to go to work or even go to school. Life opens up again with all its exciting possibilities of active participation in a growing, changing society that needs all the talent it can muster.

She has made her case well but she continues, reminding the reader that 'we are no longer living in an age where a man's status was measured by the dependence and uselessness of his women', although she allows herself a passing aside that 'something of this attitude seems to linger here in Australia still, in the minds of women as well as those of their men'. This point is elaborated on later in the essay.

Considering the times, Clift has made a strong, radical case for working wives. The actuality in Australia was even more conservative than would appear from the quotations and figures above as married women in the workforce were not likely to be in executive or dynamic situations. Women teachers and nurses (the usual 'professional' occupations for women) often retired when

they had children. Avenues of work available to the married woman were often clerical, factory or shop oriented so that in the main, women worked not for career satisfaction but to get money to buy things for the house. Clift shows her awareness of the fact that domesticity was still a preferred option for many women,[6] taking care not to provoke unnecessarily any of her audience and qualifying all that has gone before with a defence of

> ...wives who prefer complete domesticity to the risks and hazards of competing in a world that is tough, fast and demanding. And why not, if that is satisfying to them?

There is condescension in the 'them', particularly as it is followed by 'But for the rest of us'. Clift liked to see herself as a trend-setter, aware of what was happening elsewhere in the world. Her own life was never in the 'normal pattern' for an Australian housewife, she performed 'paid' work all her life, from choice and then from necessity. The Johnstons had consciously rejected the world of husband's salary, suburban home, mortgage and superannuation in order to become full-time writers. Clift allied herself with the 'modern' wives, those who look further than the four walls of domesticity.

Although her feminism and her sympathies are clear in this essay, she has at least tried not to alienate the 'non-working wives' but rather given them points to consider. In circular fashion, she returns for her closure to the biblical quotation that began the essay and

provided the title. 'A virtuous woman who can find?' asks the Book of Proverbs. 'For her price is far above rubies.' She has exposed the condescension of the quotation, described the domestic situation in contemporary Australia, clearly stated her position and, on another level, provided a new definition of virtue:

> ...'the fruit of my hands' and all the pleasures and satisfactions involved in the fruit-picking.
>
> And if that is synonymous with virtue, I think virtue is infinitely more interesting than vice, and more than its own reward.

With the essay 'On Waste Not Want Not', which appeared the next week in the 'Herald', Clift was again ahead of what were soon to become concerned community values. Beginning with a description of the amount of waste generated by her own family, she quickly moves on to the 'rubbishing of Australia', quoting a friend and his description of the Centre and the North:

> ...where, he said, not a waddy nor a creek bed, not gibber plain nor Aboriginal cave, not any spot worthy of a tourist's attention is left unmarked by a mound or cairn of cans, hurling back the sun like heliographs -- or staging posts in a game of hare-and-hounds that is routed across the Wide Brown land, using egg-cartons, aluminium foil, and a variety of containers made from indestructible plastic as the trail.

This almost prophetic description of growing squalor is tempered by nostalgic, though realistic, memories of the 'bottle-oh with his horse and cart hung with chinking hessian sacks' and references to other 'economies' where things we throw away represented valuable items. The piles

of discarded newspapers become an apt symbol for a journalist's view of the waste.

> A whole generation of trees must have been slaughtered and pulped to provide that paper on which a whole army of journalists -- eager, disgruntled, cynical, enthusiastic, hungover, ambitious, headed for stomach ulcers or an executive chair or only the mat -- recorded their meaningful or frivolous messages.

The next six 'Herald' essays found their way into reprint in Images in Aspic, but the lighthearted 'On a Choice for the Maja', dealing with 'topless' fashion for women, which was printed in the 'Herald' on 27th July, 1965 was omitted from the collection. Fashion was an appropriate subject for the Women's Section pages,[4] but the whole 'topless' idea had become a political and moral topic of discussion as politicians and self-appointed 'guardians of public morals' thundered and prognosticated about where women's fashions were heading. Lower necklines and higher hemlines took up an immense amount of media attention, with the public discussion often sarcastic and sometimes serious. As Wheatley says, 'Clift clearly found the issue both anthropologically fascinating and delightfully silly'. The juxtaposition of the arrival of the African Ballet on an Australian tour provided the stimulus for this Clift article, as some of the members of the ballet appeared 'topless' on stage. Controversy raged with self-appointed moralists revealing their insularity and underlying racist attitudes. This was well understood

and exploited by Clift, enabling her to talk about Australian society in an international context.

She was not the only person to see the silliness of the controversy. One writer to 'The Herald Letters Page' suggested that as our moralists were demanding that the African ballet dancers cover up because that was our custom, they should equally demand that our ballet dancers strip to the waist when they tour Africa.

Under the wittily allusive title of 'On a Choice for the Maja', Clift produced an amusing essay which has not turned out to be ephemeral. Her closure provides a somewhat ribald answer to the question 'Should a woman go topless?'

> Anyway, this is academic speculation while we are still moiling among the winter sales. The testing time for the topless must wait for warmer weather. And I feel that its adoption as a general mode won't depend on whether a woman has principles, is a daredevil or a rebel or a trail-blazer, whether her husband approves or disapproves, or anything of the sort.
>
> Is what she's got worth showing?

This sort of comment: 'Is what she's got worth showing?' is surely a masculine and patronising perspective. For the price of a snappy 'closure' here she has cast doubt on the depth of her feminist principles, preferring style to content in the presentation of a witty riposte.

A month later, 'On Living for Love Alone' appeared, the odd essay out in the midst of a group that were all to

be reprinted. The essay dealt seriously and originally with the question of whether marriage was 'fast outliving its social usefulness and (would) soon become obsolete as an institution'. As happened so often, Clift looked at the question from the point of view of young people, many of whom, as she says, look at marriage and express their view 'in their characteristic shrugging-off attitude of, "Why bother?"'

Clift immediately balanced this with the actual Australian picture.

> Yet the Saturday churches in every suburb and country town are misty with tulle and lace and mothers' tears, and bright with flowers and young hope. Obviously a lot of people believe in marriage still.

The pithy expression 'Saturday churches' implies that these churches have no real role to play in the everyday life of the community any more. Her expression succinctly hints at convenience religion and the purely social nature of the choice of getting married in a church. Her images of 'misty with tulle and lace and mothers' tears', juxtaposed with 'bright with flowers and young hope' give an incisive picture of Australian marriage. The mothers, who quite possibly married during the Depression years, would have had relatively spartan weddings and can now indulge their romanticism vicariously through their children. Clift herself, who had a a post-war 'non-white' registry office wedding may also have experienced some wistfulness

about the 'tulle and lace'. The bright flowers and young hope show the eternal optimism of the young despite the fashionable cynicism of 'why bother?'.

At this same time, Olga Masters was still working as a 'stringer' for the 'Northern Star' in Lismore, reporting 'the Births, Deaths and Marriages of ordinary working people'. As Deirdre Coleman reports, Masters' answer to those who sneered at her covering such things was: "What is more important than a wedding?"[7]

In The Lucky Country, Horne pointed out that while church attendance in Australia in the 1960s was less than for instance in the United States or the United Kingdom,

> 'Australians still like to use their churches for marriages. Almost all marriages are celebrated in church, but as K.S. Inglis suggests in Australia Society, this may be a habit left over from Nineteenth Century culture, rather than any indication of religious adherence.[8]

Though Clift is writing about marriage, her essay is really about love and she writes deeply and feelingly. There is no irony, real or implied, in this closure.

> To expect marriage to last on a diet of love alone seems folly, but to marry without love is a greater folly yet. Most of us, fortunately, have proof that love exists, with as many faces as there are people to recognise it, and as unlike that breakfast-time wail from the radio as a diamond is from a piece of tinsel.
>
> I know that in all the marriages I know that have endured and grown into a shared and exciting and rewarding human adventure -- and there are so many of them to balance the shattered ones -- love has been the third party to the contract. Not as an oracle though, and not as a whipping boy. But, more gallantly, as a comrade and a conspirator.

With hindsight and the knowledge of how difficult the Johnstons' marriage was, it is possible to see wistfulness and regret in Clift's expression here as well.

The following two essays were destined to be culled for Images in Aspic. It seems reasonable to assume that demands of publication brought about this date rather than any particular significance of the final 'aspic' essay which happened to be 'A Birthday in the Kelly Country'

There were eleven more 'Herald' essays that appeared in 1965 and were not 'culled' for either of the two contemporary anthologies. They may not have been considered suitable by Johnston. Perhaps they were just too late for Images in Aspic and, in the main, a little too early for The World of Charmian Clift. These essays are examined in the second half of this chapter, 'Too Late. Out of Aspic'.

NOTES

1. TILL, p.2.
2. TILL, Notes.
3. Clift's article 'February' in POL in 1969 would return to this area of concern. This would be one of the articles 'culled' for The World of Charmian Clift and printed there under its original title of 'This way to Megalopolis'.
4. cf. TILL, Notes.
5. Lisa Tuttle, Encyclopedia of Feminism, (Arrow Books, London, 1986).
6. Donald Edgar, Introduction to Australian Society, A Sociological Perspective, (Prentice-Hall, Sydney, 1980) p.121.
7. Deirdre Coleman, Olga Masters Reporting Home, (UQP, 1990) p.xvi.
8. Donald Horne, The Lucky Country Australia in the Sixties, (Penguin Australia, 1964) p. 65.

XIV. TOO LATE: OUT OF ASPIC, ii.

By the end of 1965, there would be eleven essays which were too late to be included in Images in Aspic and which would not be 'culled' for The World of Charmian Clift. The group begins with 'Getting With the Forward-Lookers' and ends the year appropriately with 'We Three Kings of Orient Aren't'.

'Getting With the Forward Lookers' consists mainly of a witty description of Clift's new lifestyle in a modern flat which was still under construction. This situation had been brought about by Johnston's readmission to Royal North Shore Hospital with a recurrence of his tuberculosis and other health problems.[1] Putting a brave face on her new circumstances, Clift relates an anecdote of an eccentric Russian aristocrat who carried off a situation of straitened circumstances with style, and wistfully expresses the hope that she could emulate her. Involving her readership with her personal life in this way, she reinforces the persona of the brave housewife and mother, 'just like you', facing and overcoming hardship.

'Festival Fever', the next essay, is ironic from the very title. The major so-called 'festivals' of the sixties were very staid and contrived. Sydney had its Waratah

Festival and Melbourne its continuing Moomba. To 'enjoy' these festivals, the public stood on the footpath behind temporary barriers as floats, mounted on concealed trucks, drove past. The floats represented such institutions as the Sydney County Council, The Australian Gaslight Company and The State Bank (then the Rural Bank). People stood behind totally unnecessary police barriers and watched as the predictable procession passed by. Clowns in papier mache masks tried unsuccessfully to 'jolly up' the spectators who were just that: non-participating spectators. Clift's point is that they are not really festivals as there is nothing festive about them.[2]

At the same time that Clift was considering 'Festivals', George Johnston was writing the text for the astoundingly popular photographic book The Australians.[3] Garry Kinnane says that 'it could be argued that the 50,000-word text outshines (the) photographs'.[4] In the book Johnston laconically sums up the Australian phenomenon of festivals by relating an anecdote.

> In an outback pub I stopped with a friend once, for luncheon. The choice was corned beef, and we were each given a dry, coarse, stringy hunk of it. "Vegetables?" my friend asked, and was scornfully reminded of the drought. "Perhaps some tomato ketchup," he tried. She turned to her husband in disgust. "Chuck us over the Red Ned, will you Ern?" she called. "Bastard 'ere thinks it's Christmas." Will we ever, I wonder, think of this land as a place for festivals and thanksgivings...?[5]

Clift writes sympathetically of the importance and age-old significance of spring festivals, particularly in the

Old World.

> All this is very proper. There is the old earth all miraculous with nubs and buds and leaves and new spears of life pushing up through the crust. Renewal and regeneration. It was dead and it is alive again. ...Corn King and Spring Queen have always existed in some form, imbued with tribal magic, mystically linking us lesser clods to the dark and powerful mysteries of the earth.

The appropriateness and ritual nature of these ancient festivals contrast with the contrived nature of Australian festivals. Clift uses her power to present what are actually pagan symbols and values acceptable to her audience. She then damns the Sydney Waratah Festival for its ordinariness. The attack is all the more effective as Clift has just painted a glorious picture of the re-awakening of the Australian bush after a fire. With the alliteration of such phrases as 'flannel flowers fuzzily uncurling' Clift underscores the unique beauty of Australia. She is not saying that festivals are bad, just criticising the lack of imagination, the inability to see and celebrate the beauty around us and create uniquely beautiful Australian festivals. Clift then treats of the Waratah Festival and her sarcasm is scathing.

> So here in Sydney we celebrate this time of year in our own strange tribal way, with a massed band championship, a floral extravaganza, some organised exhibitions of Art and Culture, mannequin parades, and the usual procession of floats. How feverish can you get?

Aware of her audience, Clift appeals to their sophistication by assuming they must be just as bored with the

so-called festival as she is. The list of events, the capitalisation and dismissal of Art and Culture, the use of 'usual' with the floats and the heavy sarcasm of the rhetorical question, 'How feverish can you get?' are damning. Nevertheless, Clift makes an attempt not to offend, referring to the 'prodigious amount of work and organisation involved' though she still asks: 'But is it joyful? Is it, in fact, festive?' The question is rhetorical as she has shown that there is little joy or festivity in the formula. She manoeuvres her audience by the device of the contrast with the age-old festivals of the old world and the hint of what could be achieved here with her description of the genuine beauty of the Australian bush so that she can be sure of the answer and reaction of her readers when she asks, 'Is it, in fact, festive?' Clift was developing a pattern of making her readers feel superior, praising the natural and the things of good taste and recognising the shoddy for what it is. Her taste, in the persona of the essays, was that of sophisticated, worldly people who recognised in their columnist, if not an arbiter, at least an exponent of accessible sophistication.

She seems just as sure of her readers with the description of the excessive advertising of our age in 'A is for the Atom Age'. Her attack on the use of classical pieces of music as backgrounds to commercial jingles could

well have been written in 1991 as this is an evil which is still with us. The paragraph where she muses on the fairy-tale seductiveness of the permeating advertising is a witty fantasy.

> Here I am, in that jet plane wearing marvellous clothes and jetsetting through Moments of Truth in Madrid and Grand Prix in Italy (as a matter of fact I've seen a Grand Prix and only felt very hot and sticky and worried about my mascara running) and visiting the Acropolis by moonlight and being entertained by the devastating commodore and climbing the Eiffel Tower (I never did because I suffer from vertigo) and skiing with the international mob in Switzerland and getting all togged up for a Carnival. However Prince Charming is always there, smoking the right cigarette, and the ugly duckling, merely by spreading the right goo on her face, will inevitably turn into a swan.

By using the first person and the personal asides in parentheses, Clift involves the reader with the plethora of advertising with which she and the reader have been assailed. These advertisements are intended to evoke the glamorous and sophisticated but they do so only to unsophisticated people. By presenting herself as a genuine well-travelled, sophisticated person on the one hand and by 'pricking' the balloon and showing the false glamour on the other hand ('my mascara running') Clift exposes the fraud. This 'reductio ad absurdum' of actually seeming to move into and live the fantasy emphasises the ridiculous nature of the advertisements. She seems to have summed up in that one paragraph above, decades of electronic media advertising. Her understanding of advertising and ability to see through the devices being used may come in part

from the fact that she too is manipulating her audience.

Clift had not been exposed to television at all before her return to Australia twelve months before she wrote this paragraph. Almost like an 'innocent abroad' she is able to appreciate its tricks and deceits and to understand its message. Richard Walsh, fully involved in the advertising world before he started POL magazine, chose Clift as his main feature writer for that publication, recognising her percipience and feeling that she would relish the less restrictive format and pressure of a monthly publication.[6]

In 'On Time to Kill', which followed on 28th October, 1965, Clift deals with the problem of increasing leisure from the woman's, particularly the 'housebound' woman's, point of view. She is addressing her audience of mainly female readers in a manner to which they can readily respond:

> ...particularly as she hadn't achieved a four-day week but was still mucking in for her twelve or fourteen hours on the home front, getting the kids off to school and home again and shopping and cooking and washing and ironing and supervising homework and sitting on committees and weeding the garden and being nurse and housekeeper and chauffeur and hostess and all the other things wives are supposed to be, while her husband, having done his daily stint, could loll around and watch TV or go fishing.

In a few years time,[7] Germaine Greer would be saying the same things in the explosive Female Eunuch.

> Housework is admitted to be a typical vicious circle; work makes more work and it goes on. It is so

> difficult to break such a circle that it seems almost essential to break right out of it, and insist on doing something else altogether. Regular periods of 'freedom' are still contained within the circle, and this is why they won't work. Most forms of compromise will not do the job, although they may alleviate symptoms of strain temporarily. For the same reason, incorporating some self-chosen work in the circle will not work insofar as incentive and energy are constantly being vitiated. There is no alternative but rupture of the circle.[7]

Greer speaks of the 'vicious circle' of housework and catalogues the exploitation of 'working wives'. Her solution is a breaking of the circle. Clift's work is important as an early statement of the problem. Without the abrasion of Greer's statement, without abandoning compromise, she let the readers, the housewives in particular, realise that they were not alone. Many readers of the time have spoken of the immense relief they felt at seeing their own problems in print, in realising that they were not the only ones suffering injustice. Clift reached a wide and receptive audience. She may not have solved their problems but she did make them think positively about them.

Of the next series of essays which were not 'chosen', presumably because of their perceived ephemeral nature, 'Pssst! Your Dichotomy is Showing' is probably the most important. In this essay Clift deals with issues which had stirred the Australian public and officialdom to ludicrous outrage at the time. In a thunder of voices reflecting the unthinking insularity of Australia in the sixties, hers is

a calm, sane voice showing the public or official reactions of the time to have been inappropriate and narrow. The ABC had made and televised a documentary entitled Living on the Fringe which 'portrayed underprivileged Aborigines, migrants and Anglo old-timers living in Sydney's inner-city slums'.[8] Clift commented as follows:

> There was the ludicrous exhibition of injured civic pride on the part of the Sydney city fathers regarding the ABC documentary Living on the Fringe, and the serious suggestion that the film should not be shown abroad without the usual utopian falsifications that British migrants complain about so bitterly and that send many of them right back home again.

A similarly calm, sane voice would be heard again when Carolyn Jones commented on the documentary upon its reshowing in 1990. She pointed out that it 'was made several years before the existence of poverty in Australia became a major issue for the media and for government'.[8] Wheatley describes the controversy of 1965.

> Though it eventually won several awards, at the time of its first showing an alderman from the Sydney City Council, terrified of the effect the film might have on immigration, demanded that it be impounded by the Premier.[8]

Clift praises the ABC and analyses the film. She then moves to Australian criticism of a Japanese documentary about Australia and exposes the hypocrisy of Australian reactions. Her comment about the ABC film applies to both documentaries:

> ...it seems incredible that we are the only country

> in the world to so delude ourselves that we can believe, or pretend to believe, and publicly state, that we have no seamy side.

Her passion for things Australian along with her reforming zeal surfaces as she pleads for a consideration of real human values. With heavy irony Clift decides that 'spirit' does not quite convey what she means; 'all right' she says, 'let's be racy and use a dirty word -- soul of the human race in general and the Australian race in particular'.

From world issues, Clift moves to what would have been the cause celebre of the time in Melbourne, in particular, and to an amazing extent all over Australia. As one who remembers the incident well, I find it hard to convey the extent of the pretension and pettiness that accompanied the incident of 'The Shrimp'. Clift refers to 'the lamentable grotesqueries of the Ultimate Outrage of The Shrimp'.[9] She of course regards the 'Outrage' as the reaction of the Melbourne matrons, not the lack of hat or the short dress, finding the whole thing:

> ...quite bizarre, from the importation of The Shrimp herself -- so young, so lovely, so refreshingly innocent of The Cup or What The Cup Stands For either socially or sartorially -- in the bridlings and flouncings of the plumaged matrons who were decked in the very hats and ensembles that for decades have raised the eyebrows of the rest of the world.

Clift continues her attack on the 'plumaged matrons' with a quotation describing 'Australian shopping matrons in misguided and astonishing hats, riding tireless

escalators in department stores like swans in Lohengrin'. She sees the dichotomy in our acceptance of someone like Barry Humphries, 'who makes himself a mirror to reflect all the foibles, indolences, insincerities and hypocrisies' that we disown in outrage when someone else points them out. 'Perhaps', she says, 'like Mrs Everage, we all believe he's really showing us Madge next door.' She sees Barry Humphries as 'a sort of apprentice Aristophanes. And perhaps no country in the world is so desperately needful of one.' She extends the image and, in her closure, suggests that we might all look 'a bit more closely into the mirrors presented to us'. This is what Clift herself has been doing, holding up the mirror in such a way as to give an acceptable reflection of 'foibles, indolences, insincerities and hypocrisies'. She uses humour as well but relies strongly on the persona of the close friend, just like you, who can say things that would not be acceptable from a real outsider. Her persona is a literary device, just as surely as Till Eulenspiegel ('Owl Mirror') in German, Major Thompson in French, and Sir Roger de Coverley.

In 'On Being Unable to Write an Article', which appeared in the Heralds at the beginning of December, 1965, Clift revealed something of the strain of writing a weekly column. This is a construct, all columnists

probably experience feelings such as this and, at a moment of low inspiration, write something of this nature as a sort of 'set piece'. Embedded within the piece, however, are indications of real problems of health, overindulgence and family and marital strife. Clift explains it this way:

> It has been more than a year now that I have been writing these pieces every week. And this week, as every week, I have come smack bang up against crisis.

She continued to write the weekly column, meet deadlines in a professional way, and, in the last year of her life, take on what was really an extended monthly column as well. That the pressures of these tasks would have contributed to Clift's early death can be inferred from this article. Speaking at the conference of The Association for the Study of Australian Literature in 1990, Elizabeth Riddell, one of Australia's most experienced writers and commentators, said: 'To have a column is the most terrible thing that can happen to you'. Riddell went on to explain how hard it is to write creatively to a deadline. In her Foreword, Wheatley explains specifically why the column was difficult for Clift.

> In many ways, Charmian Clift was the last writer on earth who should have taken on -- who should have been any good at -- a weekly newspaper column. Though one of the hallmarks of the essays is a sense of lyrical effortlessness, Clift was in fact an exceedingly slow writer, who strained to achieve her craft.[10]

Clift shows her awareness of the difficulties associated with writing the column and admits that all writers have problems with meeting deadlines. Her description of how she is affected evokes a feeling of absolute desperation. The tone is one of panic as she speaks of 'terror', 'desolation' and 'chronic recurring paralysis'.

> This is the most terrible feeling, of panic and desolation, of terror, of the most awful loss. I have compared notes with other writers about this chronic recurring paralysis of the talent and find that it is common. Everyone gets it. I suppose that ought to help, but in the grip of the paralysis it doesn't seem to be of any consolation at all.

She then presents a kaleidoscopic array of things she could write about. She involves the family with a little vignette of son Martin playing chess, and a reference to husband George in hospital. Four paragraphs in a row begin with 'I ought...', thus invoking the sympathy of the procrastinators in her audience. There is a reference to her own doctor and her smoking, a final reference to her beloved Laurence Sterne and then the impish closure: 'What I should be doing, of course, is writing this article'. There is an immense shift of mood from desperation to impishness and Clift has by now artfully delivered her essay.

'On Kelly in the Summer' should rightfully have accompanied its predecessor 'A Birthday in the Kelly Country', which appeared in Images in Aspic, since it is

by way of a sequel to it. The occasion is a 'Kelly Festival and Pageant' in the town of Euroa and the essay deals with the controversy stirred by town councillors not wishing to celebrate the memory of a criminal. Clift treats the Kelly saga historically while freely admitting her pro-Kelly bias. As Wheatley says, 'Charmian Clift had a romantic and idealistic love for Australian bushrangers and bushranging tales'. This love, or at least interest, would probably have been common to many of her readers. Books, stories and films about Ned Kelly always attract a keen following.

Having admitted her bias she tells the Kelly story in a sympathetic way, she herself being influenced by Nolan's interpretation, and her 'appreciation' of his Kelly in the Spring being both personal and incisive.

> Being of a romantic (even nefarious) turn of thought, I am with the pro-Kelly faction (it is interesting that you can't really be neutral on this issue), and I have in front of me at this moment a reproduction of Sidney Nolan's painting called Kelly in the Spring, with a drift of spring blossom, and Kelly's dreaming face most poignantly locked within the clumsy helmet. It is one of my very favourite Nolans and I wish desperately that I could own it. (The Arts Council of Great Britain does, so I don't expect there is much hope for me.)

Clift considers the question of 'whether Edward Kelly is a genuine hero-figure or only a country hood, retrospectively fraudulent'. Her tone indicates clearly her bias, 'I think his was the dark star and the fateful rose', but she gives the facts of the Kelly story briefly

and clearly. Her subjectivity shows in her choice of words: 'But the police were on to 'Red' and Nelly, and on to their brood too.' Clift refers to Ned's sister as 'glamourous Maggie' and tells how she 'turned up to the Glenrowan affair in a Gainsborough hat, which proves her to have been a girl of some style.' In short her defence of the Kelly gang is not to deny their criminal actions but to defend their style.

> What I like about that Kelly lot is that when they took to banditry they did it grand.... Their home-made armour was outrageous, and their bombast was outrageous too, but at least they entered into their contest with the law in the spirit of gladiators....

Clift concludes by reaffirming her admitted prejudice and wistfully musing on human frailty.

> And another thing occurs to me, thinking about the Kelly gang and all their doings. If someone could make virtue as gallant and gay and interesting as vice we would all be good overnight.

'Saturnalias, Resolutions and other Christmas Wishes' appeared in the 'Herald' on 21st December, 1965, the last Women's Section before Christmas. This time of year was always particularly difficult for Clift. On Christmas Day, 1942, she had given birth to the daughter who was to be adopted out and whom she was never to see or hear of again.[11] The illegitimate birth was kept a secret, so much so that her sister Margaret, when interviewed by Garry Kinnane, could still seriously doubt 'the truth of the story of an illegitimate child'.[12] Clift's readers could have had no idea of the reason for her sadness, although

hints of the melancholia that stayed with her over this traumatic separation occur throughout her writing.

The essay is quite remarkable when one considers the nature of Australian society at that time. In the Australian census of 1961, nearly 90 per cent of the population professed adherence to the Christian religion. For the 1966 census the figure stayed fairly constant at just under 90 per cent.[13] Even more important than these percentages was the almost universal acceptance in Australian society of the Christian idea of Christmas. Words like 'Saturnalia' and 'pagan' conjured up visions of savage rituals, in no way connected with the bourgeois respectability of the festival as celebrated in Australia. In the 1980's and '90's, with the increasing secularisation of our society, articles about the pagan or pre-Christian origins of Christmas have become commonplace. Clift's revelations in 1965 must have seemed quite iconoclastic.

She begins the essay by disarmingly describing her own Christmas season excesses and then involving the reader.

> I know that I am not alone in this or some similar resolution. There must be thousands and thousands, if not millions and millions of perfectly respectable people gulping down their Alka Seltzer at this very moment and wondering if they can ever Face Certain People again. This, to me, seems to be the true spirit of Christmas as practised in this fabulous land.

The 'millions and millions' is certainly hyperbole

but she has made her point and each reader would at least have been able to think of someone of their acquaintance to whom the remarks could apply. Clift then states her theme: 'Christmas has reverted to what it was originally. That is to say: the Saturnalia'. This is an arresting statement, to many readers probably shocking. She goes on to present a sober, historical picture of the origins of Christmas.

> The fact is that nobody really knows when Christ was born. But another fact is that until the fourth century December 25 was celebrated as The Winter Solstice, or The Nativity of the Sun.

Clift is presenting another side to Christmas that had somehow not penetrated the general Australian conscience. She continues, even using the holy word 'Virgin', duly capitalised, in a pagan context.

> In Egypt and Syria the celebrants retired into an inner shrine from which they emerged at midnight, crying: 'The Virgin has brought forth! The light is waxing!' and the Egyptians even represented the newborn sun by the image of an infant which was brought out on this his birthday and displayed.

After these revelations, Clift describes the Saturnalia, relating how the Romans appropriated the festival for themselves and depicting their manner of celebrating it. 'Doesn't this seem familiar?' she asks.

> Even if we are upside down, and it is summer instead of winter, we drift (or lurch) back to the old custom of things.

She makes the further point that 'As sun-worshippers anyway this season suits us' and then describes the

Australian method of celebration as probably 'a necessary catharsis'.

After this iconoclasm it is time for some appeasement. Clift agrees with the Anglican Archbishop, Dr. H.G. Gough, 'in everything he has had to say about unnecessary luxuries and office parties and Keeping Up With the Mythical Joneses'. She even describes herself as 'disappearing in a crumpled sea of wrapping paper and getting soggy over carols and stars and Away In A Manger...'. Clift thus probably survives with her persona intact but she must certainly have caused some thinking in Christmas Week, 1965.

On Thursday, 30th December, 1965, when the next Clift essay appeared, The Sydney Morning Herald 'letters to the editor' page contained a letter from Donald Campbell (Rev.) of Inverell.

The Reverend Campbell took Clift to task for "her attacks on Christianity" and her "usual ignorance" and advised her to "make herself better acquainted with the facts". The Reverend Campbell wrote as follows:

> Her last effort, attacking Christmas as originating from the Roman Saturnalia, shows the usual ignorance. The Saturnalia was, to quote one authority, "a time of unrestrained disorder and misrule... During its continuance no public business could be transacted, the law courts were closed... and no malefactor could be punished."
>
> The orgies of debauchery that took place in the longest nights of the year meant that no woman could walk in the street without an armed bodyguard. The Christian Church, with a true instinct, chose this time to declare the birth of Christ into this dark and lustful world, and to gather its people to

> worship Christ when the pagans were corrupting themselves with sensuality and lasciviousness.

It is difficult to see the Clift essay referred to as "attacking Christmas". The Reverend Campbell is of course talking about interpretation rather than facts. His rationalisation that "The Christian Church, with a true instinct, chose this time to declare the birth of Christ into this dark and lustful world" can be seen as representative of one aspect of the sixties. His generalisation of "the pagans" and his description of them "corrupting themselves with sensuality and lasciviousness" gives a good picture of the darkness into which Clift's essays were spreading some light.

Clift did find a champion. In those days before the existence of Facsimile machines, it was some time before the 'Herald' printed a response to the Reverend Campbell's letter but, on 7th January, 1966, C.P. Murphy wrote as follows:

> Sir, In suggesting that Charmian Clift should make herself better acquainted with the facts in her "attacks on Christianity", it seems a pity that the Rev. Donald Campbell ("S.M.H." Letters, December 30) did not better acquaint himself with the facts.
> In taking Miss Clift out of her context, Mr. Campbell takes far more liberties than the former ever does with Christianity in its historical context. As an admiring reader (male), who has not missed one of Miss Clift's splendid essays, I would humbly suggest that your writer has consistently communicated comtemporary truths of Christianity -- love, humanity, understanding and tolerance -- perhaps more effectively than the Rev. Campbell has ever been able to do from his pulpit.

The intense loyalty that Clift inspired in her

readers is evident in Murphy's defence of Clift. One can assume that, as is their policy, the 'Herald' published these letters as representative of correspondence they were receiving from many readers. Clift must have been aware that she had 'stirred up' controversy. Her next essay may well have been designed to placate readers who had been offended though it in no way constitutes a recanting or denial of the thoughts expressed in her 'Saturnalias...' essay.

'We Three Kings of Orient Aren't', which finished off the year, appearing in the 'Herald' on 30th December, 1965, contrasts markedly with its predecessor. The essay is 'Christmassy', nostalgic and sentimental. From the colourful beginning, 'Gold on red and red on gold and silver on blue and blue on gold and gold on green, peacock colours, jewel colours...', she wallows through Christmases past and present. Little personal anecdotes, appropriate to the season, reinforce the Clift persona, possibly reclaiming to the fold any readers she may have alienated with the 'pagan' thoughts that preceded Christmas. One paragraph will suffice to show the personal style where Clift combines tradition, nostalgia, family and a little touch of Australiana.

> The packaging I liked best of all my Christmas parcels was a gift from a young girl, which was wrapped in white tissue paper and tied with green ribbon, and to the green ribbon was attached a plain white card that she had decorated quite elaborately with gum nuts. This same young girl had also been sewing for her mother's gift a marvellous peacock

> made of scraps of brilliant silk appliqued on to dark blue hessian. Perhaps it really wasn't so marvellous at that: it was the fact of somebody bothering to make something by hand that was impressive. Reassuring actually.

The 'young girl' was quite likely Clift's daughter Shane. The use of the third person for 'her mother's gift' reinforces this assumption as that would be an acceptable motherly method of avoiding embarrassment for her child. It is a very carefully organised paragraph. There are evocative words such as peacock, ribbon and silk and colours of white and green which have a Christmas style to them while the dark blue of the hessian combines a luxurious colour with a simple fabric. The introduction of the gum nuts reinforces her earlier comments about Australian elements. The paragraph is about 'caring', 'bothering' and 'taking the trouble' and this is the theme of the essay which has been developed gently throughout the piece. The closure is equally gentle, providing a neat ending to the year 1965 and, at the same time, a smooth beginning to 1966.

> The gifts of the Magi sometimes come in strange disguises and plain wrappers. But they all have something in common. Time mostly. And thought. And a great deal of bother.

Those last few short sentences of the closure resonate and stay with the reader for a long time. Clift's essays also took time and thought and a great deal of bother. In a time of cliche and triteness she was original. Over an extended period, on a weekly basis she

was able to make a unique contact with a very wide audience and establish for herself a privileged position as essayist.

NOTES

1. cf. Notes, TILL, p.303.
2. Nadia Wheatley in her end-note to the Clift essay speaks of the Waratah Festival as 'always a rather lack-lustre affair'. I have clear memories of the drabness of both the Waratah and the Moomba festivals.GT.
3. The first print run of 37,000 hardback copies sold out in three days, later paperback and 'pocket' editions continued the success and the book was translated into twelve different languages. SMH, 1st December, 1966.
4. Kinnane, p.247.
5. Robert B. Goodman and George Johnston, The Australians, (Rigby Limited, Adelaide, 1966) p.57.
6. cf. chapter 'Winter Solstice'.
7. Germaine Greer, The Female Eunuch (MacGibbon & Kee Ltd. Great Britain, 1970) p.327.
8. TILL, Notes, p.304.
9. Wheatley sums up the incident in her TILL notes, p.304. The English model, Jean Shrimpton, known as the Shrimp, was invited as guest of honour to the 1965 Melbourne Cup. She scandalised public opinion by attending Derby Day with no hat and a dress five inches above the knee.
10. TILL, p.10.
11. Interview with Sue Chick, Clift's daughter, July, 1991. GT.
12. Kinnane, p.305.
13. Commonwealth Year Book, 1968.

XV. CHARMIAN'S WORLD, i.

> THE WORLD OF CHARMIAN CLIFT, and a very large part of my own world, ended quite suddenly on a night in July of 1969, and with the death of this remarkable woman who had been my wife for almost twenty-four years there was also abruptly terminated a phenomenal aspect of highly personal communicative writing in Australia.[1]

The World of Charmian Clift appeared first in 1970. It has had several new editions since that time. The book consists of essays from the 'Heralds' as far back as Christmas 1964, and from POL. The POL essays will be examined in the later chapter 'Winter Solstice'.

The 1983 edition contained an introduction by Charmian's son, Martin Johnston, along with the original George Johnston introduction. Martin wrote of the tremendous interest in his mother's work, particularly her non-fiction, and of the strong interest in a re-issue of her books. The recent appearance of the 'Imprint' series of Clift books shows that interest to still be alive. After stating that the essay 'was a form that had never been particularly cultivated here, except perhaps by Walter Murdoch', Martin summed up his mother's essay-writing qualities as follows:

> She was ready to look at everything and listen to anyone (indeed, she couldn't help doing either) and also to listen to herself. She had a vast range of what used to be called 'curious learning', especially of the sort she most loved: that of Shakespeare,

> Donne, Burton, Aubrey, Browne and Sterne. She wrote an English that in its love of the long, complicated yet ringing sentence went straight back to those favourite antecedents; brought a new kind of literacy to the Australian press; and, if it occasionally 'went over the top' did so in the manner of Hokusai's Wave, with strength and grace.[2]

The reference to Walter Murdoch is pertinent. In the preface to his 'Collected Essays,'[3] Murdoch identifies the one thing all his 'pulpiteering is about':

> That, my breth--I mean, that, as I see it, is the peril of which the world needs to be warned, in season and out of season... What I do mean is that young Australians must not tamely settle down to the unadventurous barn-yard sort of life to which modern civilization is apt to condemn us.

This surely is the same preoccupation Clift had, in her life and in her writing. She was aghast when well-meaning friends tried to find a suitable house for the Johnston family when they arrived back in Australia in 1964, a house 'in the suburbs', 'a habitation as far out from the city as was compatible with children's schooling and our own work'.[4] Murdoch of course implies far more than this when he speaks of 'the suburban spirit' and Clift rejected the spirit as well as the fact of suburban living. She was ever a 'protestant', endeavouring, as Nadia Wheatley says, 'to wake the reader from what she perceived as the noon-time' drowsing of lotus land Australia.[5]

In addition to being Australia's pre-eminent essayist, Walter Murdoch also ran a weekly newspaper column for many years in the 'West Australian'. In its

early days, the column was called 'Life and Letters' and there were other contributors besides Murdoch. Later on, and up into the 1950s, the format changed to 'Walter Murdoch answers Readers' Questions'.[6]

Murdoch provides a clear reference to what Clift was doing in the 1960s in Sydney and Melbourne. Her interest in everything and anyone parallels his and this interest is reflected in the writing of the two essayists. They were both exceedingly well-read and had the ability to share their learning in a way appreciated by the Australian audience they attracted and held. Martin Johnston's reference to the 'style of 'long, complicated yet ringing sentence' also seems fitting as a reference to both columnists. They each brought a 'new kind of literacy' to the newspapers that carried their columns.

George Johnston stated in the original Introduction to The World of Charmian Clift that the collection had been 'culled from the last two years of her writings'. This is not the case as there is one essay from 1964 and there are several from 1965 and 1966. The 1964 essay is entitled, simply, 'Christmas' and it represents Clift's thoughts on the occasion of the family's first antipodean Christmas for some fifteen years.

Christmas, particularly one being spent back in Sydney for the first time for many years, held a very poignant meaning for Clift. It has only recently come to

light that it was on Christmas Day, 1942, in Crown Street Women's Hospital in Sydney, that Clift gave birth to the daughter who was adopted out and whom she was never to see again.[7]

Clift writes an essay which is different from the sort of pre-Christmas writing that Clift's readers would have been accustomed to. There are two distinct parts to the essay and they stand in strong contrast to each other, with different levels of meaning and distinctly different approaches.

In the two opening sentences Clift presents a startlingly harsh picture of Australia at Christmastime.

> The harbour view from my study window, so cool and magical until now, offers nothing at the moment but intimidation. The sea is dull and battered flat by the burning wind, and in the foreground my favourite eucalypts are streaming sorry parched banners.[8]

She speaks of the view from 'my window' and refers to 'my favourite eucalypts'. This use of the possessive pronoun gives a strongly personal note to the harshness of the picture, as if she is trying to insert herself into a scene which seems strangely alien to her. There is a note of amazement in the expression, as though she were a migrant experiencing the phenomenon of a hot Australian Christmas for the first time.

This is economical writing with the personification of the intimidating view, the images of the burning wind and the sorry parched banners. Clift, in somewhat of an

understatement, acknowledges how strange it is to be having a hot Christmas again. Then the whole scene is depicted in as horrific a manner as possible. The people at the beach are represented, not as 'sun-bronzed revellers' for instance but, as 'the half-naked crowds milling there in the hope of relief'. The city is depicted as 'ringed by bushfire smoke' and the senses of smell, sound and feeling are all exploited in another short passage:

> ...one gets the sharp, dangerous, acrid smell every now and again, and the sirens of the fire-engines have been wailing hysterically all the morning. In this house we flounder about gasping, like landed fish.

This highly dramatic writing recalls the horrific Kafkaesque passage in Peel Me a Lotus[9] where Clift depicted the smells and discomfort of the heat after 'things went wrong on Hydra'. She makes the same link here between the physical discomfort and the effects on humanity.

> Shop assistants are looking really harried, young mothers exhausted, children fretful, fathers worried (for their bank accounts undoubtedly).

She then finishes the first part of the essay with the type of enigmatic aside that she would normally use to finish an essay, introducing a tone of resignation with the use of 'suppose' and 'about': 'I suppose Christmas is about miracles anyway'.

In the 1983 edition, this sentence comes at the

bottom of the page. One turns the page half wondering whether there is any more. The lack of a link is almost certainly intended. The contrast with the Greek Christmas which Clift now depicts is emphasised by the sudden break in the narrative as she changes the tone with the biblical cliche of 'Promised Land':

> No more dismal or disillusioned little band ever stumbled into its Promised Land.

As Clift describes Christmas on Kalymnos with its complete absence of commercialism she is providing an insight into another culture and making a comment about and criticism of Australian attitudes.

> Christmas is a religious day, honouring the birth of Christ, but definitely not a spree. Nobody, alas for the children, had ever heard of one S. Claus.
>
> There were no gewgaws, bells or decorations for sale in the few island shops, no children's toys, no greeting cards, no bon-bons, coloured lights, tinsel, holly wreaths or imitation snow. And -- Mother of God! -- what could we possibly want with a tree![10]

Having prepared her audience for this simplicity by the excesses of the first half of the essay, Clift describes the little Australian family 'making do', constructing a crib from '(miracle of miracles) five tiny and rather dented celluloid dolls forgotten in a dusty box marked 1921 below the counter in a coffee house'. She depicts a romantic and exotic scene: improvising decorations, wrapping sweets, making a Christmas tree from an unlikely salt-encrusted branch 'with hen droppings and with a couple of tentacles of dried octopus hanging from

it'. This basic scene is made accessible by the involvement of Clift's family in much the same way that they were involved in Mermaid Singing.

Another level of appreciation comes with the destruction of innocence in the Greek attitude to Christmas. With some licence Clift melds the family's experience on Kalymnos and Hydra into one continuum and describes how they were given permission to cut a tree from a private fir-grove and eventually, in the Greek families, having a Christmas tree became a status symbol.

With heavy irony Clift completes the circle with her personal description of the coming of commercialism.

> Fortunately the gradual seeping through of the true commercial spirit of our Western Christmas saved the little fir thickets of the island from total destruction.
>
> Last time Barba Yanni brought his donkeys the neighbour lady said wonderingly: 'Of course you may have a tree, but why put yourselves to so much trouble? Look, I have such a pretty plastic one. See? It goes up and down like this. Put it away after. Use it next year just the same. You can buy one from Mitso.'[11]

Clift has thus, in microcosm, and on several levels, held up a mirror to our celebration of Christmas. With personal anecdote and sensitive appreciation of another culture she has shown the insidious effects of commercialism and made a plea more subtle than the usual annual appeal for us to 'return to the true meaning of Christmas'.

The conclusion to the essay consists of contrasting

the takeover of Christmas by commercialism with the leit-motif of the home-made crib which is handed on as a sort of talisman of lost innocence.

> And one could buy gewgaws and bells and coloured lights both plain and flower-shaped and bon-bons and tin toys and imitation snow and holly wreaths and Christmas stockings and celluloid figures of that recent saint added to the Greek calendar -- S. Claus....
>
> And one could buy plastic cribs everywhere. Before we left Greece we gave our crib to the little girls next door who had loved it for so long...[12]

Most of the 'Herald' essays for the next few months were chosen for Images in Aspic until August 1965 when Clift wrote 'On Letting Asia in',[13] in which she looked at the history of Asian migration to Australia. She eschewed the euphemistic approach that usually accompanied articles on this subject, describing the indentured labour system as 'slave labour', and expressing sadness and surprise that the Chinese should have been treated so badly in Australia during the gold rushes.

> ...one might think that their case should have had strong appeal to that embittered colonial mentality that was so basically concerned with the plight of the underdog.
>
> What happened in fact was that the unfortunate Chinese were assaulted, stoned, mobbed, robbed, beaten up, murdered, and even scalped for the novelty of their pigtails.[14]

Clift then deals in similar forthright fashion with 'the principle of White Australia' and with what she calls our pre-World War II 'ambivalent attitude towards our Asian residents.' The attitude may well have been 'pre-World War II' but it was still very much in evidence in

Australia in the 1960s. At the start of the decade The Bulletin still carried on its masthead 'The National Australian Newspaper "Australia for the White Man"'. This phrase was removed in 1961 when the magazine 'came under more liberal editorship'.[15] As Donald Horne points out, 'The symbolic dismantling of the White Australia Policy' began in the mid-1960s'. Horne sees it as an opportunity afforded by Prime Minister Holt taking over from Menzies. One of the first effects was to have the qualifying period of residence for citizenship made the same for non-Europeans and Europeans.[16]

Clift mingles guilt with nostalgia as she conjures up the physical picture of the Chinese in Australia, describing the Chinese, but evoking the feelings and attitudes of the Australian citizen by means of word and image which reveal prejudices and fears underlying the stereotypes.

> There was, on the one hand, something mysterious and deliciously sinister about the thought of opium dens, incense, joss-houses, gongs, heathen ritual and such. Brocades and pigtails and long fingernails and oriental inscrutability and Fu Manchu. And on the other something so whimsical about Johnny Chinaman with his market garden, his painted vegetable cart, his fantastic way with the most soiled garments, his cabbalistic laundry tickets, his politeness, his neatness, his baggy pants, his lisp, his deference. But whether whimsical or sinister, superstition clung around him like an almost visible aura. 'You must have crossed a Chinaman.'[17]

By viewing the familiar in a revealing fashion, showing Australian attitudes to have been at best condescending

and at worst very prejudiced, Clift seems in this essay to at last make the break from a Europe-centred world to an Asia-centred world. The Johnstons had been far more sophisticatedly aware of Asia through the forties and fifties than most of their compatriots. Their joint novel High Valley, Johnston's wartime experiences and books, and Clift's willingness to look at her home country from the point of view of a recent arrival all contributed to a clear vision of Australia's Asian position. She makes a statement which was often to be heard in the coming decades but which was still relatively new at the time.

> Coming back to Australia one is even more conscious of Asia. Not as the Far East. Not as the Near North. Not even as Our Neighbours. One is conscious of Asia as the place where one lives.

Clift's symbolic use of the Australian eucalypt, which appears first in this essay growing gracefully in the Yunnan Province of China during wartime, is exploited as a link and forms part of the closure where she expresses her hope for greater racial tolerance from the young.

> Ideas, like the eucalyptus tree, take root and grow. Watching the young together, Asian and European, I hope profoundly that they are exchanging good souvenirs to plant and proliferate everywhere.

'Living in a Neighbourhood', which appeared in the 'Herald' in October, 1965, just after the closing date for essays to appear in Images in Aspic, is purely nostalgic. The contrast with the essay just considered is striking.

Part of Clift's appeal to the readers was the unpredictability of subject matter week by week. Part of her appeal also is that, when dealing with nostalgia, she looks back with her readers to an earlier period and recreates a partly make-believe time when it is possible to believe that everybody was happy. It is this conspiratorial memory that enables the mood to work effectively. Clift's descriptive talents enable her to recreate the neighbourhoods both real and embellished by memory.

After beginning in Greece, Clift moves to London and recalls the intimate parts of that city with a piling up of evocative neighbourhood names that would sound quite romantic to Clift's Australian readers.

> Somebody once said that London is less a city than a series of villages, and if you live there for a while you do enter into an emotional relationship with your own village, which might be Chelsea or Soho or Pimlico or Notting Hill Gate or Mayfair or Rotherhithe or Putney or Limehouse or Bloomsbury or Hampstead.[18]

The picture Clift presents of the neighbourhoods is even more exotic than are the names. She introduces characters, peopling the romantic places with equally romantic types: 'nannies', 'gaudy chieftains', 'loose ladies', 'street corner prophets' in a swirl of humanity and colour as in the following sentence:

> A neighbourhood is nannies in a square and intense young students and gaudy chieftains in coffee bars and street-corner prophets hurling denunciations and loose ladies being asked to move on and successful actors being seen and decayed and slightly dotty

> gentlewomen pricing haddock and exquisite women emerging from converted mews to sweep away in silver Jags, and whether a neighbourhood is going down or going up it has a certain intensity in atmosphere and a coherence in spite of its fluidity.

Clift is saying here in as passionate a way as possible that London, 'over there', is the place of life, real life, where all the things that literate people have been reading about since their childhood, really happen. Her choice of language, vocabulary and expression when she next describes suburban Australia is damning.

> I think it would be straining romanticism (even though elastic) just too far to expect anybody to be passionately attached to a service station or a drive-in or a supermarket or a chain store or even a bowling alley or a Leagues Club.[19]

That Clift knows what she is doing can be seen from her use of the words 'romanticism' and 'passionately'. Most of the things she derides in suburban Australia would also be found in suburban England. Clift is manipulating her reader so that, together they can have a fairy-tale indulgence in nostalgia and romanticism.

Having prepared the ground, Clift then gives a personal and detailed description of the neighbourhood she has just moved into, the Neutral Bay area just north of Sydney Harbour. The area is recognisable from the clear descriptions of the shops and of the corner pub with the 'wonderful oak tree'. Clift lavishes as much romanticism and nostalgia on this Australian suburb as she did on the London ones. She is to some extent here measuring the

worth of her new Australian setting against the standard of the English neighbourhoods she had so lovingly evoked. While this does give a cachet of authenticity to the Australian, it does by the same token diminish the reality at home. By way of introduction she personifies the neighbourhood.

> It seems to have a quirky sort of character. A blend of the raffish and the smart, a mixture which I, personally, find piquant and attractive.

Clift is leading the readers with the implication, probably justified, that they will find the blend piquant and attractive too. The personification is extended as the reader is taken on a tour of the area. The shops and businesses chosen are those with nostalgic names or connotations. It is not 'the grocer' but 'the family grocer'; the haberdasher, the tailor and even the gunsmith conjure up earlier times when certain transactions were 'bespoke' rather than merely commercial. The hardware store is an 'ironmongery', the word 'greengrocer' has pleasantly old-fashioned connotations and there is a milk bar and a corner pub. The last two items sit in juxtaposition with the milk bar as a very Australian institution contrasting with the corner pub which is more English. These elements would exist in readers' memories in a real or imagined landscape and Clift's essay recalls them as she establishes a relationship with her readers as a sharer of experiences.

Most of the essays that Clift wrote for the 'Herald' in 1966 appeared in The World of Charmian Clift. She was now an established writer in a field which she had made her own with a major theme of nostalgia. As Margaret Vaile said, the response to the 'Herald' by readers was continuous throughout Clift's time as a columnist. The 'nostalgic' pieces always brought an influx of letters and phonecalls.[20] Clift may well have been responding to this reader interest, and the nostalgic nature of the essays at this time can be seen from titles such as: 'The Long Hot Days of Summer', 'The Private Pleasures of a Public Market', 'Living in the Kitchen' and 'On Turning Slightly Sepia'. Not that there is a sameness about the essays; Clift would take on a nostalgic memory, lovingly recall it for her readers and usually give it a contemporary relevance.

The paragraph in 'Living in the Kitchen' which brings Clift and the reader back to the present contains a list of 'pre-' words that is a clear commentary on contemporary commercial food preparation, particularly when it is combined with Clift's quizzical parenthetical question.

> There are still country kitchens with that sort of atmosphere, and of course there are still good cooks everywhere: neither gas nor electricity has ever spoiled a fine meal, but only made its production quicker and less complicated. And, anyway, what woman in her senses would spend half her day peeling vegetables and chopping up bits of this and that and rolling out stale bread for crumbs or laboriously and messily crumbling butter and flour in her fingers for pastry when she can buy all these things, pre-peeled, pre-chopped, pre-beaten, pre-crumbled, pre-mixed, and

> probably pre-digested too, and everything at peak nutrition and with the flavour put back in (however did it get out; one wonders?)[21]

Clift is doing several things in this passage. She handles the dichotomy which is set up between her longing for a past simplicity and acceptance of present convenience by her implied criticism of the blandness of 'convenience' foods. There is a contradiction, in the longing for the past and the benefits of the present, which her readers may well have been trying to resolve daily. Clift evokes a sense of frustration by use of such expressions as 'half her day peeling' and 'chopping up bits of this and that' and 'laboriously and messily crumbling' is readily communicable. These expressions are balanced by 'pre-peeled, pre-chopped, pre-beaten...' and then the balance is broken with 'probably pre-digested too'. That she does not resolve the contradiction, only underscores the difficulties and frustrations she and her readers are confronted with, implies that there is no solution. The parenthetical and quizzical ending blames 'them', the unnamed manufacturer and his advertisers.

The essays are not all nostalgic. Readers, possibly expecting another reminiscence, often found essays of immediate relevance. The essay chosen to conclude the collection, 'Banners, Causes and Convictions', actually appeared on 5th May, 1966. Clift takes a personal and

historical view of protest and then examines the contemporary protest scene in Australia. Commenting on the rapid change in perceived attitudes in Australia since her return less than two years before she describes the scene as she sees it.

> The list of Action Committees grows. The slogans multiply and surely beget their opposing slogans. More and more people are positively for or positively against bureaucratic policies. Students meet and march. Banners are snatched and torn like battle trophies. Political rallies are stormy and even physically violent. Mothers of sons march for one cause and outraged architects for another while another group vigorously demands racial equality. Dissension spreads. Hostility also. Vigils, protests, sit-ins, teach-ins and even freedom rides are becoming usual.[22]

The apparent flippancy ('The slogans multiply and surely beget their opposing slogans') and the cynicism of 'freedom rides are becoming usual' mask Clift's own concern. A straight-out radical statement would clearly risk alienating and losing readers, many of whom probably had their 'pre-digested' prejudices about 'Action Committees...students...vigils, sit-ins, teach-ins' and the like. Clift presents herself as a concerned observer, and is then in a position to make her point in one terse sentence: 'Post-war apathy of the complacent affluent society has exploded into drama suddenly.' She has manoeuvred herself into a position of siding with the protestants and doing it logically.

Clift wrote in a similar fashion, not just about protest but about women's issues, Asia and the White

Australia Policy and Australian society generally. Wheatley sums up what Clift was doing in this manner.

> ...Clift was well aware that 'if you're raging to say your say...you still have to find how to say it within a compass that is acceptable ("don't do it in the street and frighten the horses")'. Thus her tone was never strident, her prose was always exquisite, and her command of her form was so assured that she could slip her ideas to people over their breakfast egg without provoking indigestion.[23]

It is the mark of the essayist that topics should be diverse. Shortly after the essay about protest, Clift wrote of the Sydney Opera House which was then under construction, entitling the essay 'Pilgrimage to a Possibility' and firmly indicating her approval of the project. At the time, the construction of the Opera House was under attack from just about every sector of society, with ridicule and derision greeting every aspect of this building whose construction seemed to stumble from controversy to controversy. The Opera House would eventually become the proud symbol of Sydney but at the time of its construction it found few champions. Clift is lyrical and passionate in her praise of the building.

> I don't know why a beautiful building in the making has this haunting quality of linking past and future. It is like seeing an old dream change its shape, as old dreams do, and turn into something else.
>
> Mungo MacCallum, in Nation, wrote a piece about this Opera House called 'Drawing a Dream'. I can only say Credo, Credo. I believe, I believe.[24]

This is a good example of Clift's persuasive prose. She locates the Sydney Opera House with the great buildings of antiquity and endeavours to have her readers do the same

by use of the repeated construction 'Suppose...suppose'. She is daring her readers to use their imagination and to travel through time and space with her.

> Suppose--just suppose--that one had been on just such an inspection tour of the Pyramid of Cheops, or the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, or the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus, or the Colossus of Rhodes, or the Mausoleum at Halicarnassus, or the statue of Zeus at Olympia, or the Pharos at Alexandria. All of those wonders of the world were built in their time. So is this.

Clift is stating the obvious, but by stating it in her imaginative fashion she is casting a new light on controversy, pleading the macrocosmic view as against the microcosmic petty squabbles. Moving on through periods and places -- the Renaissance, Britain, Mycenae, China -- she sums up the wonder of it all with a simple sentence.

> Somebody, somewhere, once, to the end of perfection and above the yappings of the mob, spent years and years and years working out the complicated mathematics of simplicity.

Inevitably, and in a way that gives point to the imaginative classical tour, Clift brings the essay back to the present. This was Australia after all and Clift had seen so many travesties presented in the name of 'culture'. She pleads for performances worthy of the setting.

> (but could we please have plays instead?--I mean, rather than Robin Hood on Ice, or the latest M.G.M. spectacle).

Her closure is still passionately involved.

> I still thought, driving back across the Bridge. Oh, it is beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.

NOTES

1. George Johnston, Introduction to WOCC.(also quoted at beginning of introductory chapter, 'The Charmian Clift Phenomenon').
2. Martin Johnston, Introduction to WOCC.
3. Walter Murdoch, 72 Essays,(A & R, Sydney, 1947) Preface.
4. 'The Joys of a City', I in A, p.83.
5. OBAWO, p.3.
6. Bruce Bennett (ed.) The Literature of Western Australia,(1979) p.299.
7. Interview with Clift's daughter, Sue Chick, July, 1991 by GT. So great was the secrecy surrounding the birth in those days of repressive and misdirected 'middleclass morality' that as late as the 1980s, as Kinnane reports, Clift's sister Margaret could still 'seriously doubt the truth of the story of an illegitimate child'. Kinnane also states that Johnston felt that Clift's 'deep regret over the matter might have explained her frequent retreats into silence and her often otherwise inexplicable tears'. Kinnane, p.305.(also referred to in chapter 'Too Late For Aspic)
8. WOCC, p.61.
9. PMAL, pp.155 et seq.
10. WOCC, p.62.
12. p.63.
13. p.64.
14. p.122.
15. Donald Horne, The Lucky Country Revisited,(J.M.Dent, Melbourne, 1987) p.113.
16. I was an avid reader of Clift's column at that time and, indeed, an avid newspaper reader and this was the first time I had seen enlightened statements about Asians in print. 'White Australia', 'the yellow horde', 'the Asian peril', these and similar cliche sentiments had been presented as fact to the Australian public for so long, it was a shock and then a relief to read the balanced view presented clearly and logically in Clift's column.GT.
17. WOCC, p.123.
18. p.107.
19. p.108.
20. Interview with Margaret Vaile, 1989, GT.
21. WOCC, p.44.
22. p.255.
23. TILL, p.7.
24. WOCC, p.102.

XVI. CHARMIAN'S WORLD, ii.

By the end of 1966, as Garry Kinnane says, 'there were two Charmian Clifts developing',

> ...the one of public success who wrote novels, television plays and a newspaper column, and with a public image of great ease and grace and a degree of wisdom that she passed on to grateful readers. And there was the unhappy, alcoholic wife, loathing her coarsened body, in a state of terror every week at the prospect of writing the column, forcing herself out of bed at 4 a.m. to get it written before the distractions of the day overwhelmed her. The public and distant relatives saw only the first Charmian Clift: close friends and family watched, helpless and saddened, the decline of the second.[1]

There were however certain fortuitous occurrences that could inspire and reinvigorate Clift. In 1967 Sidney Nolan returned to Australia for his major retrospective exhibition, enabling the pair to rekindle their warm friendship and understanding.

Clift wrote the essay, 'Uncrating Mr. Nolan', to describe the event and Brian Adams, in his biography of Nolan, drew heavily on her essay, writing what amounts to a paraphrase for his description of the event.[2] Clift's original version follows:

> It wasn't Apollo who came out of these wraps, though, but Sergeant Kennedy, dead at Stringybark Creek. Mr. Nolan looked surprised, as though that wasn't what he had expected. He said the pink hill had got a lot pinker in the twenty-one years since

> he'd seen the painting last. He ran his fingers exploratively over Sergeant Kennedy's spilt blood and suddenly grinned and said: 'Still fresh.' There was a clump of what looked like snowdrops growing in the blood. He said yes, yes, Adonis and the flowers springing up eternally.[3]

The essay appeared in The 'Herald' on 31st August, 1967. Clift had previously written about Nolan two years before in 'The Rare Art of Inspiring Others' which appeared in The 'Herald' on 1st April, 1965 and was reproduced in Images in Aspic. In that essay, though the reference was obvious, she did not refer to Nolan by name. There is no such reluctance in the later essay. Clift manages to clearly evoke the occasion, as witness Adams' dependence on her text. She goes further than mere description though, presenting much of Nolan the man and artist with glimpses of his humour and understanding. When talking about the difficulties of assembling the collection from all over the world, Hal Missingham says that 'He had had a bad scare with the closing of the Suez Canal'. Clift then comments:

> Mr Nolan said he had had a bit of a scare too. He had thought of Burke and Wills on the Bitter Lakes, but this time they had been paddling the painting.

Clift's comment is revealing of Nolan, showing how the mind of the artist works. He has melded the reality of Burke and Wills with the reality of the painting. We also see how Clift works and thinks, reporting the exchange between Hal Missingham and Mr. Nolan. There is no disrespect in the use of 'Hal', rather a sort of

Australian acceptance. There is no stuffiness but rather great respect in the use of 'Mr', recalling as it does at the same time the title of the essay, 'Uncrating Mr. Nolan'. Clift's description of the incident with the two Wimmera paintings shows her subjective involvement and sensitivity to Nolan's reaction.

> So the early one was brought out from another stack and placed alongside, and it was just as if the magician had brought off his card trick, because the effect was startling. You could see that there was twenty-five years between them, and in that twenty-five years nothing had happened to the landscape but a great deal had happened to Mr Nolan. He looked as pleased as if he had won a bet. You knew that these two paintings were terribly important to him, spiritually important, I mean. A sort of touchstone.

When she says 'He looked as pleased as if he had won a bet', Clift is using an image that readers, particularly Australian readers, can readily identify with. She is demystifying the great artist, showing the man behind the magic without detracting from the magic. After Clift's evocation, the reader feels as though he or she has actually been present at the 'uncrating'. Clift manipulates the reader into the experience, bringing the senses into play. In describing herself as 'shivering a bit there in the cold vaults' she is sensually sharing the visual and emotional experience of the uncrating.

In the conclusion to the essay, she moves almost imperceptibly from the art of Sidney Nolan to Art in general, fitting a comment of Hippocrates to Nolan's work 'The Trojan Women'.

> Hippocrates could say with confidence: 'Life is short but art is long'. Pericles could say with confidence: 'Future ages will wonder at us, as the present age wonders at us now.' And Mr Nolan could say, running his fingers exploratively over Sergeant Kennedy's spilt blood: 'Still fresh.'

Clift is positioning Nolan among the greats. That each of the three expressions is apposite to its time and that all convey the same message of the timelessness of great art is evidence of Clift's craft as a writer. The closure, as mentioned above, returns to the bronze Apollo, 'smiling his archaic smile through the protective wrapping of two thousand years of Piraeus clay'.

The ABC decided to make an hour-long television documentary about Nolan's homecoming,[4] directed by Storry Walton, who had produced Clift's ten-part series My Brother Jack, with the script to be written by George Johnston. Adams relates how the ABC tried to renege on the arrangement but Nolan's persistence and 'impeccable Irish logic' forced a reluctant Allan Ashbolt, assistant head of the ABC's Talks Department, to allow the documentary to be made. With a reduced budget, limited time and rather rushed travel, the production team set off to the centre of Australia. Clift accompanied them and three of her essays in The World of Charmian Clift describe this journey: 'The Centre', 'The Rock', and 'The Olgas'.

In these essays Clift reveals a deep sympathy for and understanding of the land and its native people. The first of the three Central Australian essays was 'The Centre',

which appeared in the 'Herald' on 5th October, 1967. The 'Herald' changed the title to 'Voyage into the Outback'. As usual, Clift's title seems more appropriate, since she is not writing about the voyage, but about the Centre itself.

> From twenty thousand feet the hills are like fat squishy tumours, or dried out scabby ones. Benign compared with the incurable acid-wound of Lake Eyre, steaming corrosive white and vitriolic after placid Torrens, where, all unknowing, Swift set the longitude and latitude of Lilliput. Gulliver sprawls defenceless for your microscopic examination. Pitted pores. Dried-out capillaries of watercourses. Culture slides of viridian clotting thick creamy yellow. Wind ridges raised like old scars, and beyond them the even arid serrations of the Simpson Desert, dead tissue, beyond regeneration.[5]

This is a fine piece of writing. Clift dips into literary allusion, medical and scientific imagery and the colours of the artist to present this scene with energy and wonder. She is witnessing something unique and fitting her description to the uniqueness of the scene. The 'fat squishy tumours', 'dried out capillaries' and 'old scars' of the above description are immediately balanced with an evocation of the beauty and colour of the landscape.

> And yet, the tenderness of the pinks, the soft glow of the reds, the dulcet beige, and violet seeping in. The landscape, after all, is alluring beyond reason. Voluptuous even. You could abandon yourself to it and die in a dream...

She has now insinuated herself, and the vicariously sharing reader, into the landscape. The short, verbless sentence 'Voluptuous even' contrasts with her normal long ringing descriptions while the statement 'You could

abandon yourself to it and die in a dream' is romantic in its submission to the landscape.

Clift then refers to Kafka and concludes her description of the Centre as it appears from the air with a continuance of the idea of death in the landscape.

> Such unearthly beauty, one knows -- and still yearns -- is fatal. It is a landscape for saints and mystics and madmen.

Death, the yearning for death, death as an escape was a leit-motif in Clift's works. The death references in the later Clift essays, leading to her own demise, give a frisson to the latter-day reader but probably passed unnoticed at the time.

Clift gives a description of the Centre from the land and sums that up with the powerful sentence:

> A thousand million years at least it takes to make something so rich and strange, so profound, so unbearably potent with dreams.

All this description of the landscape is a preparation for the meeting with the inhabitants of this land. The meeting takes place in Alice Springs where, in the garish desecration that is the main street, the 'inheritors' meet the 'disinherited'.

> ... a desecration of imbecile Op lighting, great lozenges of red and blue and green and yellow clownishly colouring the tourists stepping eager for bargains, souvenirs, and drinks before dinner. And through the tourists, the lilac-scented air, the hectic fun-fair illumination, the slow lurching drift and black shadow-weave of the disinherited, stripped of ancient dignity, degraded, subservient, aimlessly drunk on a Friday night.[6]

Clift continues and presses home the comparison. A 'lady inheritor, sensible in drip-dry, shoulder bag bulging...' is contrasted with the 'tall black trio teetering in the most curiously graceful progression' whom she accosts 'imperiously' in a quest for cheap boomerangs. The description is sympathetic as she describes the black women, 'legs...like thin crumpled brown ribbons flying, their hair pale straw' with reference to Russell Drysdale (who) 'has drawn them often and compassionately, by tin huts and shanties, patient with the heavy burden of life'. Clift brings the painted images up to date as she says, 'Now they are patient on the street corner, movement arrested, patiently waiting as if waiting was an end in itself'.

Such subjective and involved description of the aborigines was as new and as full of impact as the Drysdale paintings. Even sympathetic descriptions of aborigines were frequently paternalistic and condescending. Alan Moorehead's Cooper's Creek, for instance, published in 1963, and, incidentally with dust-jacket cover and illustrations by Sidney Nolan, provides examples of descriptions which show how far Clift had moved from the stereotype. The dust-jacket merely refers to the 'unrelenting bush with its primitive blacks'. Moorehead quotes from the account of Alfred William Howitt, the 'really exceptional man' who led the Burke and Wills

rescue expedition. His account of meeting with aborigines may have seemed sympathetic at the time but, compared with Clift's treatment, it reads as gratuitous racism with the aborigines providing 'amusement' for the white men.

> The piccaninnies were brought forward by their parents to have red ribbon tied round their dirty little heads. One old woman, Carrawaw, who had been particularly kind to King, was loaded with things... Some old clothes were then put on some of the men and women, and the affair ended with several of our party and several of the blackfellows having an impromptu 'corroboree', to the intense delight of the natives, and, I must say, very much to our own amusement.[7]

Moorehead himself, writing in the 1960's and endeavouring to describe Sturt's sympathy with the aborigines states how they were 'embarrassingly friendly, in fact, since they invited the explorers to sleep with their grubby wives'.[8] This is still racist and condescending with the adjective 'grubby' being quite gratuitous in the context.

Clift makes no attempt to paint an idealised picture of the aborigines but she does seem to depict them without prejudice and she is just as unprejudiced in her adverse depiction of the unsympathetic white tourists. She sums up the situation with the apt reported comment describing the aborigines looking at the tourists who have invaded them, 'The Aryans,...looking at the Huns and wondering whatever happened'. The historical reference adds depth and sadness to the desecration she is witnessing.

Her closure is deeply personal and intensely

poignant.

> I want to say, 'I'm sorry.' Apologize. Absolve myself. I want to tell them that I was not one of those maddened lice of explorers crawling to the discovery of their magic tribal place. I did not personally dispossess them of the ranges and the gorges and the waterholes and the caves where the Huns leave beer cans now, and crumpled paper tissues, and dubious identities chipped into the ancient rock. I did not personally disinherit them of the most sophisticated, ethereal concept of origin that ever a people dreamed. Their blood, for all I know, might be bluer than our heaven.
>
> But here in the thriving Alice the guilt hurts intolerably. What are the dreaming people dreaming now?[9]

This is fine, clear writing, original and deeply personal as Clift, in what represents an early expression of white guilt, speaks of wanting to apologize and absolve herself.

The issue has been passionately dealt with but it is not continued repetitiously into the other two essays about Central Australia. 'The Rock' and 'The Olgas', are far more travel pieces in which Clift describes these two tourist destinations which would have been still considered as rather remote by most Australians at the time. The tone of 'The Rock' in particular is largely one of exasperation where Clift takes up another issue, the attitude of Australians to the tourist industry. Her criticisms of the accommodation at Ayers Rock are scathing.

> And yet you could weep for the desecration of nobility, for the shoddiness of buildings thrown together too hurriedly and too cheaply...You could weep for the wire fences hung with campers' washing, the concrete latrine blocks, the Keep Out notices, the

> shanty-town atmosphere that prevails under the breath-taking scarps and buttresses.[10]

This passage achieves its object of forcibly showing the inappropriateness of the accommodation by the repetition of 'You could weep' and by the extreme contrast between the concrete latrine blocks and the breath-taking scarps and buttresses. Clift is just as scathing about the staff and management in the motel where 'service was meted out grudgingly' in an establishment that was run 'on the disciplinary lines of a corrective institution'. Clift gives examples of the appalling service and conditions and she details ways in which things could be improved. All this leads to a summary of absolute exasperation: 'Sometimes I think Australians will put up with anything.'

Prophetically, Clift suggests the manner in which accommodation should be arranged at 'The Rock'. Her suggestions sound very much like a blueprint for what has now been attempted at the resort some twenty kilometres from Ayers Rock (or Uluru). The closure to the essay continues the tone of exasperation.

> You wouldn't, after all, leave beer cans or the evidence of natural functions in Chartres Cathedral, would you?

The next essay,'The Olgas', is different, introducing a tone of humility in the face of such natural wonders and a feeling of insignificance and unfitness. In fact, Clift's preoccupation with her own lack of fitness risks trivialising the dramatic setting.

> Before we are out of the scrub my bare legs are lacerated with thorns and my sneakers are filled with bindies and I have given up smoking for good and all....By the time I have reached the dead tree where the real climb begins I know I am a stranger in paradise, unfit, unworthy, with my immortal longings reduced to the overriding problem of keeping my lungs working: they seem to be sticking to my ribs and tearing at every breath.

She closes with the hope that the ranger, the only one who 'belongs here, by right of love and knowledge', will be able to preserve the area. She seems to disregard the aborigines, for whom she showed so much sympathy, and ignore their clear rights in the area. There is an unevenness in these essays but, at their best, they show her powers of description and communication.

Clift's decline continued through 1967 until the Johnstons' close friend, Russell Drysdale, suggested that she take a break and go and visit his painter friend Ray Crooke in Cairns,[11] where she might also find material for her column. Clift and June Crooke got on very well together and made a trip to Thursday Island which was very successful. The letters from Johnston and Clift to June Crooke, quoted by Kinnane[11] bear evidence of the success. In part, Johnston wrote that 'the whole trip...(has) given her back so much that is real and valuable and tender and marvellous'. Clift was just as effusive, saying, 'I feel so good that I would like to go on feeling good, and feeling private too and not public property'. Clift's success as a columnist had brought with it pressures and

responsibilities from which escape was difficult.

As Kinnane also points out, Clift's editor, John Douglas Pringle, paid all her expenses for the trip and 'gave her a free hand to write as many pieces on Thursday Island for the column as she wished'. Everybody was obviously pleased to have a rejuvenated Clift back again and the readers were treated to her perceptions of the Far North. In an interesting twist on what had been the case for the first couple of years, Clift called her 'piece' 'The Island' but the Herald changed that in the column to the 'essay-type title' of 'On Thursday Island' which in this case is ambiguous. Clift may well have been trying to protect Thursday Island and its residents by using the more general title, or even to give a wider significance to what she wrote. The title reverted to 'The Island' in The World of Charmian Clift.

She avoids euphemisms in her descriptions of Thursday Island, speaking of 'what is nicely called "social disease"' and recalling Somerset Maugham's description:

> ...there was nothing there but goats, and that the wind blew for six months of the year from one direction and then turned round and blew for six months from the opposite.[12]

After describing the personal unpleasantness of living there, skin 'coated with a layer of fine dust and... mouth... permanently gritty', she describes the ugliness of the place itself.

> It is not a lovely island. It is barren, dusty, the stony soil is completely uncultivated, the

> streets are, for the most part, unpaved, the beaches are scungy with oozy weed, rusting tin, and a million broken bottles, the habitations are ugly and utilitarian.

This links clearly with Clift's exasperation over the manmade intrusions at Ayers Rock. After her clear depiction of the physical ugliness, Clift evokes the spirit of the place with sympathy and apparent understanding. Official reports and newspaper articles of the time saw only the disease, drunkenness and squalor. Clift sees these too but goes further with her wistfully repeated 'And yet' which shows her willingness and ability to penetrate further than the statistics.

> And yet. And yet. This place tastes exotic, like strange warm fruit. The trades blow, the palms stream, the dust swirls in clouds and coats ugly houses, tropical trees, rolling children, and hurtling taxis filled with grinning black faces. The days of Assemblies, China boats, shell traders, pearl buyers, and the reign of Burns Philp, might be gone, but something lingers, a smell and a taste and an essence, half squalid and half romantic, something indolent, excessive, irresponsible, shameless and happy.[13]

This links with the nostalgia of her other essays written from Sydney as Clift manages to capture the contradictions of the place and not write in paternalistic, judgemental fashion. Admitting the alcoholism, disease and illegitimacy, she says,

> But the drink and the disease are a white gift, and the illegitimate babies are beautiful and happy and adored.

Clift thus takes a 'non-establishment' point of view and subjectively gives her readers an alternative and

sympathetic insight into another aspect of Australian life. Throughout the essay Clift has used the decaying and ironically named Royal Hotel as a symbol of the decay of the island and its people. She postulates the future of the island using the same symbol, a rebuilt and utilitarian Royal. Her closure is suitably personal.

> I am glad I have tasted Thursday Island while the taste is still rank and wild. It will turn bland soon enough.

The last 'Herald' essay to appear in The World of Charmian Clift was 'Feeling Slightly Tilted', which appeared on 29th May, 1969. It is a strange essay, quite different from anything else she wrote and containing many unique features. In the essay, Clift uses the third person to refer to herself, and she does this in an extended form. She refers to herself as Clift and as C.C. although she normally wrote in the first person as part of her distinctive personal style.[14]

The last sentence is 'You might -- oh dear! fall off.' which has a bright tone, flippant even and certainly ironical. The first paragraph contains words such as 'joys... singing, whistling, cheerful, obliging...' and is pleasantly nostalgic in typical Clift style. The little parenthesis about despairs seems such a slight aside that it hardly detracts from the tone. There is an apparent reference to George Johnston which is also lightly flippant and ironical.

The person standing beside me says he knows all

> too damn well that he's tilted, and more than slightly at that, and that living with me would be likely to tilt anyone not possessed of more than mortal powers of maintaining equilibrium.[15]

The above sentence fits very neatly into the essay and follows naturally from the statement that 'she and only she, is on top of the world...(and) that even the person standing beside C.C. is slightly, ever so slightly tilted'. Any significance therefore only becomes apparent with the later knowledge that Clift committed suicide shortly after writing this and that the apparent 'trigger' for the suicide was a terrible fight with 'the person standing beside me'.[16]

Clift thus manages to maintain and even reinforce the image of her persona by means of the irony and flippancy. Remove the irony and there stands revealed the writer for whom 'it had all become too much'.[17] By writing in the third person Clift achieved a measure of detachment, and by fantasising that she was falling away from the earth she probably also achieved the same aim. By taking her own life she detached herself completely. The brightness of tone in the essay and the subliminal nature of these 'signals' reinforce the idea that Clift's death by her own hand was not planned or premeditated.

Johnston's words which began this chapter can be extended. A very large part of the world of Charmian Clift's many readers and admirers also 'ended quite suddenly on a night in July of 1969'.

NOTES

1. Kinnane, p.260.

2. Brian Adams, Sidney Nolan Such is Life, (Hutchinson of Australia, Victoria, 1987) pp. 192-3. In his biography of Nolan, Brian Adams describes the 'uncrating' of the paintings by Nolan, Clift and Hal Missingham.

> The Nolans arrived back in Australia a full month before the big exhibition was due to open. And big it was going to be, with 143 paintings given a nominal value by the Art Gallery of New South Wales of half a million dollars. Over the previous weeks the storage vaults at the gallery had been crammed with huge crates bearing numbers and stickers from galleries all over the world including the Redfern, Marlborough, Tate, Museum of Modern Art in New York, National Gallery of Victoria and the collection of Sir Kenneth Clark. Charmian Clift went along to meet Nolan and Hal Missingham in the midst of this planned chaos and it reminded her of an occasion in Piraeus when she watched a bronze Apollo, 2,000 years old, being raised from a trench in a hot and dusty back street. It was not Apollo that came out of the case Nolan was inspecting, but Sergeant Kennedy dead at Stringybark Creek. The artist looked surprised at the picture he had last seen twenty-one years ago, thinking that the hill in the background had grown pinker in the interim. He ran his fingers over Kennedy's spilt blood and joked 'Still fresh!' A clump of what Charmian thought must be snowdrops was growing from the gore. She commented on this and Nolan smiled, 'Yes, yes, Adonis and the flowers springing up eternally'. Missingham pulled out a large Wimmera picture completed only twelve months previously and now in the gallery's collection, stood it against one of the original Wimmera subjects and stepped back to make a comparison. Charmian Clift observed that little had changed in the landscape during the intervening quarter of a century, but a great deal had obviously happened to Nolan during the past thirty years of his creative endeavour.

3. WOCC, p.75.
4. cf. Such is Life, p.194. The genesis of the documentary is fully described by Adams.
5. WOCC, p.203.
6. p.204.
7. Alan Moorehead, Cooper's Creek,(Hamish Hamilton, London, 1963) pp.152-3.
8. p.19.
9. WOCC, p.206.
10. p.207.
11. Kinnane, pp.266-7, Interview GK with Ray and June

Crooke, 1982.
12. WOCC, p.218.
13. p.221.
14. I asked Robert Hockley, Bereavement Counsellor, to examine this essay as an 'end of life' essay in particular to see whether there were indications of imminent death or intention to commit suicide. He reports as follows:

> Depression, the insidious precursor to suicide, can be distinguished from melancholia, a pervading sense of sadness. There is little to suggest melancholia in this essay of Charmian Clift. Indeed, she is fascinated, filled with wonder and feels warm towards her correspondent. Her style is light-hearted and good-humoured.
>
> In its more severe forms, depression is experienced as an absence of feeling and volition, together with much self-directed hostility of which the victim may or may not be aware. Detachment and self-depreciation are fairly reliable indicators of depression.
>
> The text contains several pointers to the author's depression: "her place in space", a phrase which captures the imagination also plumbs the depths of identity and belonging, implying self-doubt, confusion and insecurity; and it is the consideration of this idea that leads her directly into the third person which is a manifestation of detachment; "the fact that I never know what day it is, let alone what time it is", may be a quaint eccentricity, but also signals a level of distraction and pre-occupation that commonly accompanies the struggle to avoid plunging into full-blown depression; "an infinitesimal Charmian Clift" while consistent with spatial perspectives, is also suggestive of feelings of insignificance and associated self-depreciation; "only C.C. is standing upright" is not at all essential to the space fantasy and implies that she is out of kilter with the world, disconnected from others and lonely in a way that depressed people feel; "The person standing beside me says... that living with me would be likely to tilt anyone not possessed of more than mortal powers of maintaining equilibrium" is acknowledgement of the stress her husband attributes to living with her, perhaps the acted-out anxiety that is frequently a correlate of depression; "as surely as C.C. knows...another umbilical cord is being severed", on the face of it a birth metaphor, and this C.C. surely knows, implying her sense of estrangement; "I would sometimes feel that I might fall off the turning earth and into the sky, falling very slowly, falling away into something else entirely", an escape fantasy where the falling away conjures up more the wish to escape from life than the childlike fantasy of flying; "But if you

tilt please make sure you don't tilt too much. You might - oh dear!- fall off", the playfulness not quite concealing the allusion to herself while attributing to others the too much tilting and its probable outcome.

These interpretations are made in retrospect, knowing that suicide followed not long after the writing of this essay. Without that knowledge the clinician with a keen eye for the indicators of depression, would nevertheless point up these potential links with suicidal intent.

Her genius as a writer would enable her almost completely to mask both her depression and her melancholia with their opposites. I would conjecture that her longstanding struggle to rise above these awful states empowered her writing with imagery and vigour. The powerful metaphor of the severing of the umbilical cord seems significant. It is a birth metaphor but here it could be a death metaphor. There is much irony. The author seems to be playing a game. She says she is out of kilter with the world. This could indicate pain. The escape fantasy is an escape from life. Children have the fantasy that they are flying. This is similar but she is falling away from the earth. 'Only C.C. is standing upright'. The idea of detachment could be significant. She is divided in herself and separate from others. The repetition of the idea of being the first woman to know her place in space could signify 'belonging'. There is attribution in the essay. We attribute to others what we can't bring ourselves to accept. The last sentence could be significant. (Robert Hockley, Robert Hockley and Associates, Human Systems Development. 5 Portview Road, St. Leonards 2065).

15. WOCC, p.199.
16. cf. Kinnane, p.281.
17. Kinnane, p.281, reported text of Clift's suicide note.

XVII. A L O N E

> Like anybody else who for twenty-four hours of every day is surrounded by -- embroiled in, part of -- an interdependent society like a family, I have sometimes muttered to myself, in exasperation or frustration or sheer weariness: 'Oh, how I wish they'd all go away and leave me alone.'[1]

Nadia Wheatley used 'On Being Alone With Oneself' to provide the title for her final volume of collected Clift essays. The 'Herald' had appropriately allowed the Clift title to stand when they published it on 16th January, 1969. The essay is multi-layered, consisting of the apparently random thoughts of the essayist who happens fortuitously to find herself alone in her house for a week. Clift expresses the thought that she is sure has occurred to other 'put upon' housewives and mothers: 'Oh, how I wish they'd all go away and leave me alone'. They do go away though Clift is quick to explain that their departure is not 'in pique, or to teach me a lesson, but quite fortuitously and separately'.Her sense of audience ensures that she presents herself in the essays as a figure with whom her readers can identify, as they would experience the mixed feelings of relief and apprehension that she depicts at the start of the essay. Had the family been driven away or had they left 'in pique', then there would have been less inclination to identify with the essayist

and not the same basis for the atmosphere that Clift manages to create in the short piece.

Using one of her staple rhetorical figures, Clift piles image on image, as she leads her audience, reminding them what the presence of a teenage-based family in the house means.

> There was no involvement, no demand, no interruption, no whirlwind of movement, eddy of activity, chatter of voices, slamming of doors, blaring of radio, calling of queries, rattle of coffee cups, flaring of anger, no catch of careless song, and no laughter.

The list begins with single words and moves to phrases, creating a memory of the way activity built to a pitch in the once busy house. Onomatopoeic words, 'whirlwind', 'chatter', 'rattle' contribute to this picture. The gentle alliteration of 'calling of queries' and 'coffee cups' and the repetition of the 's' sound in 'careless song' all help to create the picture of the house which is soon to be empty, except for herself, establishing a contrast with what has gone before. The juxtaposition of the last three elements in the list, 'anger', 'song' and 'laughter' is striking and adds dimension to the memory of the people-filled house. The scene has been created with economy in one short paragraph. Then, in a one-sentence paragraph, the contrasting scene is created with the personification of 'silence'.

> They went away and silence rushed into the vacuum of their absence and filled my tall house to brimming.

Later in the essay Clift mentions the word 'Gothic': 'I locked the doors and lit all the candles and felt mysterious and reckless and expectant, like a lady in a Gothic tale'. This helps to make more accessible the powerful scene she has created by admitting her conscious attempt to be 'like a lady in a Gothic tale.'

From the start a thrillingly sinister atmosphere is created. The house is appropriately a 'tall house', the sort of house traditionally associated with a Gothic tale, so that, in Australia, a land of bungalows, the tallness needs to be stressed. The personification of 'silence' is continued and creates the unease as Clift 'dabbled in it quite cautiously and tentatively'. A Gothic selfconsciousness is created as she becomes aware of her own body.

> My heartbeats were audible and even my thoughts too loud. I felt guilty and furtive and slightly out of control. Nefarious even. As though I had no right to... to what?

Then the whole house is personified as are its various parts.

> Somewhere upstairs a door unlatched itself with a discreet click, a window chattered momentarily and was silent again. The refrigerator shuddered and hummed...

There is a lot of almost childish fun in this, particularly as Clift reverts nostalgically to her own childhood with the lines:

You just wait, I thought, until <u>she</u> hears what you've

> been up to. You'll cop it. And heard myself giggling defiantly.

This makes for an entertaining essay and readers would be gently transported back to the fears and the remembrance of childhood transgressions. Beneath the surface whimsy, however, lies the real terror of a woman alone in a big house, a woman not used to being alone. The ending is dramatic as Clift tries to take control of herself and of the house. She has more or less promised herself that she will not use the telephone and the struggle with this simple act could well be symbolic of deeper and stronger struggles with oneself. 'And finally, weakly, with sweat in my palms, I snatched it and gave in,' at which point the personification of the house and the Gothic nature of the episode reach their climax. The house 'turns against' her, confirming her premonitions and a series of minor painful mishaps follows, 'And I began turning all the lights on at night because I was scared. It wasn't at all nice to be alone any more.' This Gothic construct with its emphasis on self-consciousness and fear of the unknown is convincingly handled within the confines of the essay. The spell is broken with the return of the family, 'clattering and chattering and demanding and interrupting' and, in circular fashion, she sometimes wishes 'they'd all go away and leave me alone'. Nevertheless there is still a note of discomfort in the closure as Clift feels 'strangely that there was some mysterious marvellous opportunity in all

that silence' that she missed.

A little later that year, on 20th March, 1969, Clift picked up a similar theme in the essay 'On Flying the Coop'. Both essays deal with the conflict between wanting freedom from the omnipresent family pressures and the desire to have one's children around. In this later essay the theme is dealt with on a more domestic level with no Gothic element. Clift identifies the situation and addresses people of approximately her age group and presumably of her social group.

> Most of my friends and acquaintances who are approximately in my age group and also parents are either coming up to this situation, or disturbingly in the middle of it, or irrevocably through to the other side of it and thinking, either sadly or adventurously, of looking for a smaller house or a unit (with one spare bedroom of course in case one of the chicks needs a temporary roost some time).

This is very much an 'establishment-style' essay with a tone of middle-class complacency along with condescension towards the young. This last feature is particularly surprising as Clift saw herself and indeed was seen to be as on the side of the Young. The Clift style and the personal subjective treatment are in evidence as usual but the essay addresses the representatives of middle-class morality; it could almost be the ladies from the Bowling Club or the CWA chatting about their 'chicks' and their own domestic arrangements, even down to that stereotype of middle Australia, circa 1960, the 'Real baked dinner with three veg and lots of gravy'.

> As for baths and laundry, these are minor matters, because they can always come home for a visit when their best friends begin telling them, or when they get so whiffy it is evident even to themselves, whichever is the sooner. They will be delirious with freedom but probably, in this first period, will 'keep in touch' quite prudently, if only for the occasional orgies of hot water, mum-style washing and ironing, and a real baked dinner with three veg and lots of gravy.

It seems reasonable to assume that the 'young woman I know rather better than any other young woman' is Clift's daughter Shane. She describes the daughter, and other people's daughters by implication, as role-playing and in so doing, she, as happened so often, is role-playing herself. Accounts of Clift at this time describe her as far removed from the settled middle-class mother she presents herself as. Jack and Pat Johnston described her as 'an alcoholic'.[2] She had a severe drinking problem, even appearing drunk with wig askew on a television programme and she was having an affair with a married man.[3]

Clift describes her daughter and her friend as 'playing cubbies'. Cubbies feature significantly in any account by Clift of her own childhood. The tribute on Barre's death dealt at great length with the cubby that she and he shared, and cubbies are significant in Walk to the Paradise Gardens and her unfinished novel, The End of the Morning.[4]

Towards the end of 'On Flying the Coop' Clift switches from a first and third person address to the

second person. The 'you' however implies 'we' and 'us' and introduces a tone of familiarity.

> You, the parents, may expect them home soon now.
> And of course you are wildly happy. Because you've been really concerned lately how scruffy they've been looking on their rare appearances, and pale, and underfed, and nervous... Et cetera. How joyfully you shop and cook again, buying up all the little delicacies they've been missing, like peanut butter[5]... soaking all their washables in enzymes, bleach, detergent, or even disinfectant, preparatory to a wash that will take a week. How happy you are. Or are you?

Clift's underlying unhappiness at this stage of her life surfaces subtly in the rhetorical question. Her picture of herself as the doting parent, joyfully shopping and cooking for her children who are following the current middle class pattern of behaviour brings to mind Charles Lamb's famous essay, 'Dream-Children: a Reverie'[6] in which Lamb creates such a comprehensive and believable picture of his imagined family that he seems to deny the illusion that it is indeed 'a reverie'. Lamb's closure is poignant and brief, 'but John L. (or James Elia) was gone for ever.' Clift draws on another essayist for her closure, 'That sad genius Edward Lear'.

> 'Calico Jam/ the little Fish swam,/ over the syllabub sea...' Do you remember the ending? You'd better. 'But he never came back,/ he never came back,/ he never came back to me!'

Although Clift has been talking about her daughter and friend setting up household at the end of the street, the sad ending could well have far deeper significance for Clift, thinking of her happy childhood with her now dead

brother, struggling at the time with a sick husband, an apparently desperate love affair, her own perceived loss of physical beauty and, of course, the ramifications of children 'flying the coop'.

Clift's piece on Australia Day, 'Last of the Old?', published on 6th February, 1969 after the Australia Day long weekend, shows Clift trying desperately to wake her fellow-Australians from their 'noon-time drowsing'. Clift first of all sums up the 60's, 'that damned decade of human confrontation over the gaps of our own silly devising.'

Looking back to the same period, Donald Horne speaks of the hopes of many Australians that idealism might have arisen from the confrontations of the time. As Horne puts it:

> But to a minority of Australians opposition to the (Vietnam) war became the declaration for a new potential in the nation and perhaps in the human spirit.[7]

In her essay, Clift first defuses the popular excuse 'we are young yet' and passionately puts the case for idealism.

> I don't know that we're so young any more. Youngish perhaps, but old enough to stop making youth an excuse for our dreadful irresponsibility towards ourselves and our inheritors. Old enough to stop indulging ourselves in one long lazy hedonistic weekend that is not a reward for any achievement but only an endless public holiday, self-decreed and honouring nothing--excepting our marvellous climate, perhaps, which is actually not marvellous at all, but brutal, savage, fickle and conducive of much skin cancer. Old enough to start doing things for ourselves, inventing things for ourselves, making things for ourselves,

> our own sort of things, I mean, and not bad copies of other people's things.
>
> I don't know why one should be embarrassed at expressing some hint of idealism. Maybe because cynicism is easier, and of course more fashionable. But I don't see why it is not possible, now, to stop the sweet rot of hedonism and get back to breathing that high thin air of endeavour that is more bracing, really, and I believe would suit our constitutions better. It used to, anyway.

This passage is complex as Clift denies innocence at the beginning then gestures towards it at the end, probably influenced by her strong leanings to nostalgia. She is urging Australians towards idealism, a perceived quality of the past, but there is a pessimistic feel that it may be too late. In the writings of this, the last year of her life, Clift was to spend a great deal of time looking back to the past.

On 27 February 1969, there appeared in both the 'Heralds' an essay to which Clift had not given a title. For the Sydney Morning Herald the title chosen was 'A Thought on Violence'. In Melbourne it appeared under the title of 'The Trials of Being a Woman'. The Melbourne title is much closer to the mark, this being a feminist essay. Donald Horne points out that the first women's liberation groups were formed in Australia in Adelaide and Sydney in 1969.[8] Clift's essay, then, appearing in February of that same year, is contemporary with early feminist thinking and, given its wide distribution, possibly also catalytic. In the first paragraph which contains a series of questions followed by two exclamations,

'Womanpower in action! Pow!' Clift uses the third person pronoun to refer to women. From the start of the second paragraph Clift shifts to the first person to create personal involvement and increase the impact of the essay.

> Every last part of us, from our minds to our innards, is under the scalpel for public dissection.

The tone of this essay is different from that generally found in the essays reprinted in Images in Aspic and The World of Charmian Clift; it is frustrated, angry and bitter. Clift had earlier dealt with the themes of women as second class citizens and of advertising as being demeaning to intelligent women. Here however she slips out of the persona of the housewife and mother doing her best and coping despite the odds and abandons the gentle, slightly bemused tone she had previously used when speaking of the advertisers and their products. 'Commercial advertising still keeps us firmly in our places' she says, and follows this with a series of demeaning examples, culminating in the exasperation of: 'and concentrating all our tiny minds on choosing the right brand of toilet tissue'. Irony has changed into sarcasm as she sums up with 'I wonder what all that patronising guff really has to do with what women think and feel'.

As Clift deals with the injustice of the female position in society, the tone becomes strident. 'Naturally', she says, 'one is at a disadvantage in being born a woman instead of a man. I don't think there is any doubt

about that. Nobody in her right mind would choose, if she had a chance...'. Now follows the main theme of the essay, which is a discussion of Margot Hentoff's review in the New York Review of Books of 'three new books by women on women -- Up from the Pedestal, edited by Eileen S. Kraditor, Thinking about Women, by Mary Ellman, and Born Female, by Caroline Bird with Sara Welles Briller.

Even though, as Wheatley points out,[9] Clift had once noted 'I am not a crusading feminist', it seems that feminism had caught up with her. Betty Friedan had eloquently made the link between American housewives and commercial exploitation.

> There are certain facts of life so obvious and mundane that one never talks about them. Only the child blurts out: 'Why do people in books never go to the toilet?'. Why is it never said that the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is to buy more things for the house? In all the talk of femininity and woman's role, one forgets that the real business of America is business. But the perpetuation of housewifery, the growth of the feminine mystique, makes sense (and dollars) when one realises that women are the chief customers of American business. Somehow, somewhere, someone must have figured out that women will buy more things if they are kept in the underused, nameless-yearning, energy-to-get-rid-of state of being housewives.[10]

Friedan had said all this and had it published in 1963. These thoughts do not appear to have been widely spread in Australia, except perhaps in intellectual circles, until the end of the decade of the '60's. Clift may well have arrived at the same conclusions without overseas prompting, and this would explain her frustration

at reading the Margot Hentoff review and her desire to share with her readers the feminist thoughts from America and to translate them for her Australian audience. There is a bitterness in Clift's comments that has rarely been evident in previous essays as she quotes from Hentoff:

> 'Only the definition of woman's territory changes as conditions change. Activities tend to fall within her boundaries after having slipped from the highest status levels. One suspects that women doctors became emotionally acceptable at about the same time pure science leaped into prominence as the field for the best minds'.[11]

In one paragraph, Clift chooses examples from Australia to illustrate what is being said.

> True? How about all that astonished publicity when Professor Leonie Kramer was given a chair of literature at Sydney University, and Jean Battersby an official voice in the future of our culture. What was there to be astonished about? They are very capable human beings, both, and splendid at their jobs, and to be congratulated, I suppose, on getting them. But why the fuss? Because they are women. And then I remember, sadly, that I heard Geoffrey Dutton, who ought to know better, referring derisively, on a television programme, to <u>lady</u> novelists. Sinks the heart.

Although Clift talks of violence in the concluding paragraphs to the essay, the tone is one of sadness. Clift contrasts the suffragettes, 'Mrs. Pankhurst's mob', with contemporary women's organisations which she finds 'mild by comparison'. She sadly states the problem of 'assertive women' who 'are likely to find themselves being avoided, even by other women'. There is clear irony in her statement:

> Women should be -- oh dear -- soft. Soft, quiet, dignified, serene, thoughtful, peace-loving.

Clift does refer to the 'new women's liberation group in America called WITCH -- Women's International Terrorist Conspiracy from Hell.' After the ironic comment: 'Maybe there's hope there', Clift adds, in case anybody has misunderstood: '(I am not actually advocating violence. Only having a little think about it.)'

The closure maintains the tone of sadness and irony, with an allusion to the earlier reference to Geoffrey Dutton's statement.

> And on that depressing thought this lady novelist will get back to her kitchen. All the same I'd hate to think those commercials have actually got it right.

On 1st May, The 'Herald' announced that Charmian Clift was on vacation, and they invited three prominent Australian women, Mrs. W.C. Wentworth, Dr. Jean Battersby, and Gwen Plumb to be guest columnists during Clift's absence. Mrs. Wentworth, wife of the Minister for Social Services and Minister in Charge of Aboriginal Affairs, was well-known in political and social circles; Dr. Battersby was Chief Executive Officer of the Australian Council of the Arts and incidentally was the first woman to be appointed to this high post;[12] Gwen Plumb was a well-known actress and media figure, acting as hostess for daily shows on radio and television at the time. That the 'Herald' would ask these prominent women to write as guest columnists during Clift's absence, and that they would accept, is indicative of the status that the column had

achieved. It would have been a simple matter to have no column at all for the three weeks or to have a staff journalist write the column were it not for the avid and loyal readership Clift had built up.

For the first two 'guest' columns the 'Herald' printed an explanation that Charmian Clift was 'on vacation', but by the third week, however, Clift's name was omitted. She was depressed at this time and her health was poor, so there may have been fears that she would not return, and would have to be replaced. I asked Margaret Vaile about this and her reply was: 'We did try other columnists but they just weren't suitable'.[13]

Mrs. Wentworth wrote 'Of camps and a lost coat' and she certainly expected Clift back, stating early in her piece: 'Never mind, Charmian Clift will readily win back those readers I lose her'.[14] Her column consisted of a recounting of recent 'adventures' of the Wentworth family around Australia. Some twenty or so names were mentioned, many of them titled or 'landed' or prominent in one way or another. This was done unselfconsciously and probably represented fairly Mrs. Wentworth's preoccupations.

Dr. Battersby's column could well be considered to be an essay as she put forward her opinions on 'Protest - by legal means'.[15] She gave a relatively enlightened 'establishment' view of protest, particularly the Vietnam protest. As was to be expected, she wrote clearly and to

the point. Compared with a Clift essay, there was a lack of passion. The last paragraph illustrates this point.

> What we should be looking to see is whether it is reasonable to give young people more acceptable outlets for their views than often exist now, and then whether the views that come forward are worth acting upon.[15]

Clift would almost certainly have looked at the question from the point of view of the young people.

Gwen Plumb's column had a lightness of tone.[16] Her style was conversational: 'Sleep? No problem. Just like horses.' She reminisced about her childhood and compared it favourably with the childhood of children today.

> Didn't worry us kids. We walked to and from school a mile and a half away with our school cases, yet most children today are driven to school.

Speaking of young people, Plumb used the third person and an apparent acceptance of the gulf between young and old which would have been resisted by Clift in a similar situation.

> And of course, as soon as they turn 17 they aim for a car...so nobody walks more than they have to.

'The Joys of Holidays', Clift's 'Herald' essay of 22nd May, 1969 was untitled by Clift and was written while she was having the above-mentioned three-week 'break' from her column. Her tone in this holiday essay is one of 'childish gleefulness' as in the first paragraph she exuberantly exclaims, 'school's out! school's out!'. She seems to have been having a holiday from the weekly column, and she sums up what this has meant for her. She

uses the first person plural to give some general significance to what she is saying, but she is clearly speaking of herself.

> I suppose a holiday is really a state of mind relieved of pressure. Most of us live under pressures of one kind or another, clocks and appointments and dates and times and contracts and obligations and the necessity to 'keep up', or 'get on', and of course we become so accustomed to our pressures that we go a little peculiar and light-headed when they are removed.

Clift speaks of her time 'off' as an indulgence, and her particular indulgence is reading. She speaks from the point of view of a writer still passionately involved in learning, researching and improving her craft. She was at this time working on her novel The End of the Morning.

> It is fascinating -- at least to a writer - to see how the veriest germ of an idea or sketch of a character in an early book is gradually explored and developed in later ones and finally becomes a major theme.[17]

The tone of excited commitment continues through the essay with no hint of the depression so evident in earlier essays of the same year. Clift's description of her house and its surroundings is quite joyful and contrasts with the ominously 'Gothic' picture of the same house in 'On Being Alone with Oneself'. She half apologises for the triviality of her comments, but the pleasure bursts through.

> ...and I know all these things are trivial in themselves but they added up to 'an immense wealth of delights' and I felt like laughing out of sheer pleasure.

After stating how pleased she was that her plans to go away, alone, had not eventuated, Clift refers to 'a wedding anniversary coming up in a couple of days'. If, as seems reasonable, she is referring to herself then it must, as Wheatley surmises, have been the anniversary of the Johnstons' first meeting rather than a wedding as they actually married in August, 1947.

Clift then indulges herself further by reminiscing about past holidays in England, Europe and Greece. This is Clift, firmly in her persona of the well-travelled Australian, allowing the reader to share vicariously the intimate moments spent in exotic locations. The closure is slightly cryptic as Clift presents herself as childishly, whimsically illogical. Apparently the 'wedding anniversary present' was an invitation to pack up and go together on the sort of holiday she and Johnston had always promised themselves and never managed to arrange. A friend finds her hard at work on the typewriter and says, 'But I thought you were on holiday'. Clift replies with what she herself calls 'zany logic' that she is on holiday and she is working hard so that she can have a holiday. Of course, to get back to what you really want to do is sometimes a holiday in itself.

This was May '69 and Clift would be dead by early July. One assumes that the next two 'Herald' essays, 'Feeling Slightly Tilted', reprinted in The World of

Charmian Clift, and her untitled 'Going Trendy and Keeping Up', were those referred to in 'The Joys of Holidays', which freed Clift to go to Norfolk Island, which provided the material for three essays in June. There would be two more essays for July, presumably written after the return from Norfolk Island. In none of these would the bubbling euphoria of 'The Joys of Holidays' reappear.

'Going Trendy and Keeping Up' appeared on 5th June, '69. Clift begins with the recent 'inundation of sociological comment...the "media society", the culture of admass, the age of gimmickry' and trendsetting and quickly moves to the nature of current advertising, which had become a Clift preoccupation.

She claims to have had access to secret publications which outline the advertising trends for the future. As an essay it is very fragmented. There are some amusing examples of possible modern trends and an attempt at a leitmotif of the advertising executive who thinks up these amazing things being given two weeks holiday at Surfers Paradise or Miami as a reward. Really, all the essay does is serve to show how well and thoroughly written were most of Clift's other essays in comparison. When she arrives at the somewhat contrived ending, 'O brave new world that has such people in it', the reader is aware that this essay has been hastily completed to allow Clift to escape from the demands of the column at least for a while.

The untitled 'Going Trendy and Keeping Up' thus provides proof if proof were needed that the column had become a chore and that Clift seemed to be bereft of ideas and was reduced to turning out an essay each week, whether inspired or not. The editors at the 'Herald' must have been aware of Clift's problems at this time to have given her 'the holiday' which ironically merely inspired her to work harder and probably faster on the two essays that followed so that she could go to Norfolk Island for a 'real holiday'.

The three Norfolk Island essays which appeared in the 'Herald' on successive Thursdays from 12th June were simply entitled by Clift 'Norfolk Island, 1, 2 and 3'. The 'Herald' entitled them respectively 'At Norfolk Island', 'Hooked on a Whiff of History' and 'The Wild and Free of Norfolk'. As usual, Clift's titles were more appropriate as the pieces are really just travel pieces. Nevertheless, they are well-written and informative and would have been interesting for readers at the time as Norfolk Island was far more 'remote' than it is now with regular air services and cheap package deals.

Clift indulges in some evocative description and talks about encounters with the locals and tagging along with a National Trust Group who happened to be on the island. These are interesting travel pieces but they are only working on one level. The sophistication, the

intellectual style, the manipulation of the reader and the intimate and personal subjective tone are missing. The committed, involved essayist is truly 'on holiday' in the 'Norfolk Island trio' delivering nothing more, and nothing less, than one would get from a good travel guide.

Clift must surely have realised that these latter essays of hers were beneath the high standard she had set for herself. There is about this late work something of what James A. Michener said about Ernest Hemingway: that he had 'built himself into a legend and when it showed signs of blowing up in his face he ended it with distinction'.[18]

Of course Clift was not a Hemingway but she had created her own legend and persona and she was having trouble keeping up with her self-imposed standards. Evidence of her concern with her own writing comes from the essays of this last year in which she continually referred to herself as 'a writer', or 'a novelist' or mentioned 'writing', things she intended writing about or the actual craft of constructing her column. These were things she previously did rather than talked about. Here on Norfolk Island she refers to more material she could have 'worked' into the piece.

> And talking of space I realise, to my horror, that mine has run out. Before I've even fairly begun too. Before I've even got to the Kingston-by-moonlight bit, which I intended for a set piece.[19]

The irony is that she 'squeezed' three pieces out of the Norfolk Island trip, which was probably not worth more than one from the point of view of the readership Clift had attracted and cultivated. As can be inferred from the above quotation, the task was obviously constantly on her mind. In 'Norfolk Island (1)' Clift wrote:

> 'In fact, I am so conscious of the potential danger to the island that I was tempted to refrain from writing anything about it at all, just in case any words of mine should damage or upset the present delicate social balance.

In 'Norfolk Island (3)' Clift wrote: 'And I also have a feeling that I have written as much as I dare about these curious outer limits to our continent'. There is an ambiguity here as Clift implies that she is worried about the effect of publicity on Norfolk Island and the reader can infer that she is also worried about her ability to continue to produce a high quality essay on cue every week.

The third piece has a strange sort of 'non-ending' which is a little unsettling for the reader accustomed to the pithy Clift closure. Through the piece has run a leit-motif about one of the islanders jokingly trying to sell (or as Clift puts it 'flog') the famous Gallows Gate. She began with a reference to the joke and she ends with:

> I have a feeling that time will provide the appropriate tag-line to that joke. If it's a joke.

Clift's last two 'Herald' essays, the last one printed posthumously, were untitled by her. The apparent

stimulus for 'The Kelly Saga Begins Again', 3rd July, 1969, was the furore surrounding the announcement that Mick Jagger was to play Ned Kelly in a feature film. Clift uses the Ned Kelly theme to reminisce about the Sidney Nolan documentary made for the ABC in 1967.[20]

After the relative banality of the Norfolk Island trio, this essay shows Clift skilfully exercising her craft as an essayist. The contrast with the Norfolk Island pieces is clear and dramatic. Her confidence shows with the unusual beginning where Clift quotes the words of Nolan in three paragraphs without mentioning his name. The words are allowed to flow as Nolan creates his vision of Ned Kelly, then, at the start of the fourth paragraph comes the acknowledgement: two long, respectful sentences, full of allusion, imagery, simile, alliteration and colour.

> Thus Sidney Nolan, arch-mythographer of Ned Kelly, musing under the lacy leaves of a giant old peppercorn tree on the prospect of two desolate chimneys rising from the rubble, an iron wheel rim, an ancient buggy seat sitting in the paddock grass as incongruous and haughty as a Rousseau sofa, the remains of a forge, and a scattering of rusted nuts and bolts. There were a couple of magpies melodious in the pepper tree and a chirpy little yellow bird hopping cheekily along the ruined wall of a former outbuilding, uncaring that this was all that was left of the house where the Kelly family had lived through events of such a dramatic and romantic order as to become Australian legend.[21]

The above passage is a fine example of Clift's style; by using words the way Nolan has used paint, she creates the scene for the reader, carefully ordering the landscape

onto her own canvas within the framework of 'Sidney Nolan, arch-mythographer' and 'events of such a dramatic order as to become Australian legend'. The euphonious 'magpies melodious' and the 'chirpy little yellow bird hopping cheekily' contrast in Nolanesque style with the 'scattering of rusted nuts and bolts' and the 'two desolate chimneys rising from the rubble'. The alliteration binds the images together and produces a poetic effect. The personification in the image of the 'incongruous and haughty' Rousseau sofa is allusive, apt and respectful.[22] The whole effect is dazzling in its achievement.

Clift's relationship with Nolan was obviously of great importance to her and though she has dealt with him before in the essays, this is new material. Her recall of the scene with Nolan is graphic, and takes up the first third of the essay. Clift seems once again sure of herself, her subject matter and her readership. She then gives the background to Nolan's presence in the Kelly country to make a film, and, in a parenthetical aside, wonders 'why the ABC has never seen fit to release that film. A lot of time and work and passion and poetry and high excitement went into it, and I know it to have been finished long since'.

Clift writes about the Kelly country, a topic she had dealt with before in 1965 in 'On Kelly in the Summer'.

Recalling the conflict between commercial interests and citizens of moral rectitude, she fantasises about the form commercial exploitation might take, still endeavouring, as Wheatley puts it, 'to wake the reader from what she perceived as the noon-time drowsing of lotus-land Australia'. Clift quickly however returns to Nolan, quoting him on what constitutes a myth, once again in the same respectful fashion.

> 'There's no umpire,' he said, 'to decide that the subject for a myth should be respectable...'

In the very last, short paragraph Clift deals with the then currently obsessive topic of Mick Jagger. Almost anyone else writing about Ned Kelly in Australia in the climate of that particular moment would have devoted most of the piece to the 'Mick Jagger affair' which caused an outrage almost impossible to conceive of today over such a thing as who should act in a particular film. Jagger was a rock and roll star, a known taker of drugs, a 'terrible influence on our young people' and he was being brought to Australia by Tony Richardson to star in a $2.5 million film.[23] As Wheatley puts it, 'There was controversy about his morals as well as his nationality'.[24] Jagger was bringing with him what middle Australia perceived as 'his disgraceful entourage'. Even worse, he was coming here to play 'our' Ned Kelly.[25]

In the midst of this furore, Clift contents herself with the mild comment: 'try as I may, I cannot quite see

Mick Jagger as a minute figure in a Sung landscape'. Her comment is in terms of Nolan's imagery, quite away from the storm of criticism directed at the fact that the choice of Jagger, a rock star and a foreigner, was an insult to Australians. Clift has risen above this and her closure gives a wryly ironic and allusive touch to the whole silly business.

> Although, when you come to think of it, our Ned was a bit of a rolling stone himself.

Here again, Clift's confidence is apparent. By the simple expression 'our Ned', Clift subtly shows where her sympathies lie with regard to Ned Kelly. She also enlists the reader's sympathy and even patriotism, though not the fanatical brand, with the possessive 'our'. The pun on 'rolling stone' implies almost an acceptance or at least not a rejection of Jagger. The tone of 'a bit of a...' is appropriately in the vernacular, implying a sort of 'here we are together, having a chat about our Ned who is a bit of a rascal'.

The Kelly essay appeared on 3rd July 1969, Clift died on 8th July. 'Anyone For Fish and Chips' appeared on 10th July 'As a tribute to Charmian Clift' as Margaret Vaile said. The essay was accompanied by Vaile's own written tribute to Clift.

'Anyone For Fish and Chips' had not been given a title by Clift. It was a plea for civilised drinking laws and customs in Australia; a topic she had written about

before. There is sadness and frustration in this essay as the sort of civilised attitudes to drinking that she had pleaded for at the very beginning of her career as a columnist had not eventuated. In reminiscing about her time in Europe, Clift seems to reject the strong Australianness that was so evident one week before in 'Kelly Country'. She speaks longingly about

> ...all the meals, breakfasts and luncheons and dinners, along the coasts of France and Italy, and by the rivers of Europe, the Rhine and the Rhone and the Loire and the Gironde and the Mosel...'

Once again she is depicting a Eurocentric world. 'Over there' is where things really happen. Speaking of her meals in Europe, Clift refers to a 'sense of ease and contentment' and 'A sort of large brimming peacefulness', making it quite clear that she has not found such peacefulness in Australia. 'I suppose I've been spoiled by living in the Mediterranean for too long' she says.

In the last paragraph Clift bitterly confesses that she misses it 'all...very much'. The closure is infinitely sad, particularly in view of the fact that this was the last piece written for her column by this elegant committed essayist who had so often shown such pride in being Australian. 'It had all become too much' for her. Clift poignantly ends with an ironic rhetorical question providing her own defeated answer.

> Or would that outrage propriety? If I made it a meat pie and a milkshake I might just get away with it.[26]

NOTES

1. OBAWO,'On Being Alone With Oneself', p.200.
2. cf.Chester Eagle tapes, Jack and Pat Johnston, TRC 821, 29.7. 1980, tape 1 of 4. (previously quoted)
3. cf. Kinnane, pp.279-80.
4. In mourning the passing of her brother, 'All I have' she said, 'is an aloe cubby'. Clift used the name Tammy to refer to the brother of the Clift figure Julia in Walk to the Paradise Gardens. Clift hints in the novel at the precise nature of the games she and her brother played in the cubby.

> Tammy and I always used lantana flowers for confetti when we were marrying each other.
>
> 'Did you marry each other often?'
>
> 'Oh, yes. Often; in the aloe cubby down there at the end of the beach. We had wedding breakfasts of periwinkles.'
>
> 'No, no, Julia! I cannot condone incest, even with periwinkles -- particularly with periwinkles! What coarse children you must have been.'
>
> 'Yes,' said Julia. 'We were. Thank God!'

In 'Australian men. A Pride of Lions?', Clift's first article for POL, December 1968, she referred to the aloe cubby and the succession of boys who 'used to bring me sticky sweets when I was eight and endeavour to lure me down into the aloe cubby we had on the beach'.

In The End of the Morning, the novel about her childhood that Clift was working on at about the same time as she wrote the essay 'On Flying the Coop', Clift refers to the sexual games played in the aloe cubby, particularly with the older girl whom the protagonist and her brother referred to as 'Creeping Jesus'.

> She liked playing doctors better than anything. Ben and I despised her, but she was fascinating to us because she had pubic hair already and little swellings on her chest, and it was she who told us first about the monthlies and that babies came out the front.(MS 7839, National Library, CHARMIAN CLIFT, p.15)

Clift also refers in the same manuscript to the 'crude drawings of genetalia (sic) on the walls of the cubby'. She and her brother both returned to the cubby as they grew older specifically to erase the crude drawings.

Clift's references to her daughter and friend as 'playing cubbies' could thus hold many hidden significances yet, presented as it is in this benign way by Clift in her middle-class persona, it is unexceptional.

5. Peanut butter provided a leit motif in Mermaid Singing.GT.
6. Charles Lamb, from The London Magazine of January, 1822. Essays of Elia and other pieces,(George Rutledge and Sons, London, 1885) pp.85-7.

7. Horne, The Lucky Country Revisited, p. 97.
8. p.221.
9. OBAWO, p.326.
10. Betty Friedan, The Feminine Mystique, p.181.
11. OBAWO, p.234.
12. Dr. Battersby's appointment had caused controversy simply because she was a woman and Clift, as mentioned above, had decried the criticism of her appointment in her essay, 'A Thought on Violence'.
13. Margaret Vaile, interview with GT, 1989.
14. SMH, Women's Section, 1st May, 1969.
15. SMH, 8th May, 1969.
16. SMH, 15th May, 1969.
17. OBAWO, p.273.
18. Iberia, p.591.
19. OBAWO, p.296.
20. Nadia Wheatley explains the background: 'George Johnston wrote the script (and) Clift accompanied the crew to the Centre and Glenrowan; her job was to get Nolan to talk.' OBAWO, p.329.
21. OBAWO, p.302.
22. Brian Adams, Sidney Nolan Such is Life, p.37 and p.58. Nolan had an affinity with the paintings of Henri Rousseau (Rousseau Douanier). Adams refers to the sight of the reproduction of Rousseau's 'The Wedding of Apollinaire' having a calming effect on Nolan at his first meeting with John Reed. Nolan also mentions Rousseau as being one of his heroes and imagines him being happy in this particular Victorian landscape.
23. cf. The Lucky Country Revisited, p. 204.
24. OBAWO, p.329.
25. In 1969 I was a school teacher in a New South Wales country town and I remember no event to equal the vehemence of the Mick Jagger/ Ned Kelly controversy. Pulpit, paper, radio and television all 'thundered' their disapproval.GT.
26. OBAWO, p.309.

XVIII. WINTER SOLSTICE

> I did not know Charmian personally before POL. I had asked Mungo McCallum to recommend someone and he had recommended her. By this time Charmian Clift had made her mark. I thought POL was the kind of magazine she would respond to.[1]

In the late 1960's, Richard Walsh, who had come to prominence in Australia as a student editor of OZ Magazine, had the idea to start a 'glossy, up-market women's magazine'. The publication he had in mind was to be something like Queen or Nova in Great Britain which had no counterparts in Australia at that time. In what Walsh sees wryly as a sort of cultural exchange, Gareth Powell, who had a reputation as a magazine publisher and the apparent ability to convince people that they should extend money or credit to publishing ventures, had arrived from Britain in 1968 on an assisted passage. Walsh already knew what he would call the magazine, so it was set up with Powell as owner and Walsh as editor. POL was the first major Australian magazine to use offset printing and Walsh revelled in the artistic freedom this allowed. OZ had used offset printing but not in colour. POL was also the first Australian magazine to use 'off-shore' printing and it was produced by Dai Nippon of Hong Kong in the first instance.

Sub-titled 'The Australian Woman', the first issue of

POL appeared in December, 1968. The sub-title would be changed in subsequent issues to: 'The Monthly Magazine for Modern Australian Women'. The change signalled Walsh's wish to target women readers who were forward-looking at a time when he saw Australians breaking many of the bonds of conservatism. Up until this time he had been working in advertising, writing fashion copy, so he had a good idea of the target audience.[1]

In the first issue the 'POL.COL' (or editorial comment, written by Walsh) carried under the sub-title 'who's who', the following brief description:

> Charmian Clift spent the formative years of her middle life with husband George Johnston among the Greek Islands. She writes a regular column for the Sydney Morning Herald.[2]

Clift remained as a feature writer with POL until her death so she was apparently seen by Walsh as a 'Modern Australian Woman' or at least a writer who would have appeal in this area. The reference to George Johnston is just an aside and is certainly not demeaning but nevertheless, Walsh still found it necessary to define Clift, the 'modern woman', in terms of her husband. As POL was a national magazine and indeed Walsh saw its strength as being in its national basis, it is an interesting omission that no mention is made of the syndication of Clift's column to the 'Melbourne Herald', Walsh stating in 1990 that he was unaware that her column went to Melbourne. He thus saw Clift as a Sydney writer (which she

was) whose influence could be extended nationally.

Clift's article for this first issue was run in tandem with an article by Ray Taylor[3] and the two articles together constituted the main feature of the issue. The introduction said: "Ray Taylor gives his impressions, Charmian Clift gives her impressions of the Australian male". There seemed to be an underlying assumption that readers would know who these two people were. Taylor's article was entitled 'A rag, a bone, a hank of hair and lots and lots of freckles'. As illustration it carried many pictures of women, mostly young. Clift's article was entitled 'AUSTRALIAN MEN "A Pride of Lions?"' The photography was attributed to Jeffrey Craig and consisted of a full-page portrait of Ray Taylor and photographs of Australian soldiers and lifesavers.

Clift's article ran to nearly 2000 words, about twice the length of the 'Herald' essays. Walsh had felt that the greater length of article, the national exposure of the magazine and the less ephemeral nature of the medium would allow Clift to expand what he saw as a talent for writing of a personal nature. She continued as a regular monthly feature writer for POL.

According to Walsh, he gave 'no guidelines as such' for what Clift should write each month. This is the same comment made by J.D. Pringle about her writing for the 'Herald'. She would come to the office of POL to discuss

the theme of the coming issue and the length of article required from her. This attention to detail and professional approach reveal the importance to Clift of her work. Walsh says that he was surprised by the meticulous copy she produced, always on time and requiring little or no sub-editing. He regarded her as a very good writer, 'a dedicated professional' yet, he says, copy from good writers is often 'a mess', but Clift's work was always 'perfect'. She would bring the copy to the office herself, seeming to enjoy the magazine and to be genuinely grateful for the new audience. She liked the 'taste' of the people at POL and the treatment they gave her work. Walsh and Clift 'hit it off', they had 'good vibes', he said, and enjoyed working with each other. She was not replaced at POL after her death, Walsh believing that her unique, personal style was 'irreplaceable'.

Clift's 'Pride of lions' article in the first issue begins with personal reminiscences of growing up in the Illawarra and '...first practising on Australian men'. She expands on her recurring theme of Australian slang names, particularly as experienced while growing up in a small country town. The 'aloe cubby' which was so important in the essay written on the occasion of her brother Barre's death,[4] is mentioned as a trysting place for a stream of young boys showering her with treats and seeking her favours. At the time of writing the POL article, Clift was

working on her novel about growing up in Kiama and much of this material can be seen as a version of what was intended to reappear in the novel. She shows a candour in this article which does not accord with the 'respectable' persona of the 'Herald' essays.

The greater candour could have several explanations. Even though the Sydney Morning Herald was Australia's most respectable newspaper, Clift had considerable freedom to write what she wished, J.D. Pringle and Margaret Vaile both being her friends as well as her editors.[5] Nevertheless she was under some constraint, as evidence a letter to Hal Missingham in which Clift claimed that,

> '...a certain piece criticising the country's leadership 'damn near got me the sack. J.D. Pringle was furious'.[5]

Even allowing for possible exaggeration in a comment from a private letter, this does seem to indicate interference much stronger than is admitted by Pringle or Vaile. At POL the young staff, the reputation of Walsh, the editor, as a rebel, the lack of tradition for a publication just starting out, the stated aim to be a 'magazine for Modern Australian Women', all these factors would combine to encourage greater candour and allow Clift to shed her 'Herald' persona. The monthly instead of a weekly deadline would also have relieved pressure and Walsh said that he wished her to have greater freedom and to reach a different audience.

In the 'Herald' essays, the activities in the aloe cubby and the early sexual adventures had only been alluded to. In Pol, Clift was more specific and in fact quite frank, considering the times.

> There was nothing else to practise on in a small Australian country town.
> They were young quarry workers and farm labourers and a few taxi drivers cruising down the coast for Sunday larks (our town had the reputation for the prettiest girls on the Illawarra coast) and a stray commercial traveller or two. Or even three, if I am to be honest. And very worldly the commercials seemed too at the time.

Whether Clift realised it or not, her preoccupation with nostalgia in these articles can be seen as a deeply-felt lament for her lost youth. At times of grief, stress or worry, it is common to regress to childhood in an attempt to escape from an unbearable present. For nine years Clift had been living with the worry about Johnston's Clean Straw for Nothing and now, as the book neared publication date, the pressures must have been increasing. In the last, posthumous article, 'Winter Solstice', Clift will refer specifically to Johnston's book and the fears it engendered in her.

Clift dehumanises the lovers of her childhood saying 'there was nothing else to practise on' rather than 'nobody else...' The reference to 'the prettiest girls on the Illawarra coast' brings to mind, and surely brought to her mind, her winning of the title of 'Miss New South Wales Beach Girl' with a photograph taken of her by her sister.

In dwelling on past beauty and past lovers, real or imagined, Clift is demonstrating the symptoms of what we would refer to today as 'mid-life crisis'. Her relationship with her readers in the 'Herald' was based on a carefully built-up persona of which one feature was her respectability. She seems to be almost preparing her POL readers for what she fears will be the other Charmian Clift that will be revealed in Clean Straw for Nothing.

While stating that she is trying hard not to generalise, Clift makes several generalisations about Australian men, concluding from her own experiences that they are not a particularly romantic lot. In looking for 'some sort of a clue to Australian men', she finds that war provides the clue,

> ...a war which they couldn't have predicted but which liberated so many of them into travel and romance and adventure and more intoxicating thought patterns than they could have dreamed of then. Even in the aloe cubby.

Clift muses about the form of respectability that has surely become the lot of her childhood lovers, and generally compares them unfavourably with their continental counterparts in particular.

> ...What Australian men, however worthy, seem to lack, is any real sense of the romantic or the erotic. As a game I mean. As that delicious knowledge of a preordained conspiracy between the sexes that European men are born with.

Her conclusion is that 'Australian men are terribly unconfident about their own masculinity'. She expands on

this with examples of drinking, surfing, sailing, competition and handyman activities. Clift is dealing with generalisations but they are made effective by her use of the third person plural, setting up a 'them and us' conspiracy and because of her keen and original observation:

> ...their mistresses are mechanical ones...on which they can lavish (and do) passions that their wives never knew existed.

Clift continues her observation with the purposely overdramatic:

> To watch them tinkering with mechanical innards on a blithe Sunday morning is to avert one's eyes hastily.

Clift certainly did not have a husband such as those 'typical' husbands she is describing, and this gives a deeper meaning to Clift's analysis of Australian men, her observations about where their passions lie and her sympathy with their wives. There may well have been regret and a wishing for normalcy deeply underlying Clift's comments.

She returns to her own experiences and in almost vaunting fashion expands upon her wartime romantic affairs and glories in a time when 'Lancelots abounded'. The regret and nostalgia are obvious.

> ...and even such a glutton as I was glutted with eternal vows and perfect red roses and locks of sandy hair and regimental numbers and sets of Airforce wings and champagne corks and the Song of Songs. And silver chains for my thoroughbred ankles.

After this climax of remembered ecstasy, the article moves quietly to a conclusion. Clift suggests that Australian

women may be at fault for the lack of romanticism in their men. There is an implication that she would be able to draw them out, though she hastily takes shelter in her old persona and makes her own claim for respectability.

> I've been married to one of the old breed, lean and slouchy and brown, for more years than I need to confess, and we have three nice children and are paying off a nice house and I don't think I would know quite how to react if you put me back on the boulevardes again...

The article ends with a reference to her growing old which has added poignancy now with the thought that within a year of writing this, Clift would be dead by her own hand.

> And when I am a little old lady in lavender lace I will say with absolute certitude and Dorothy Parker: "There never was more fun than a man." Even an Australian man.

Those last four words, 'Even an Australian man' show that, even in the magazine article, Clift kept to her formula of the sharp closure, or tagline. There is a 'cri de coeur' here which echoes her comment to the staidly settled Kiama woman who told Clift how lucky she was to have travelled the world and seen all those marvellous places: 'No, you're the lucky one.' A confused Clift produced a thought-provoking article, laced with deeper meaning than she may have intended.

For the second issue of POL in January, 1969, Clift returned to a favourite theme, the conflict of the generations, and a favourite target for attack, the

intransigence of the old in dealing with the young. The piece is called 'The Restless Old' and she begins personally by stating: 'I am an Old'. She refers to the Australian way for women to grow old:

> ...make up a bridge four, join a women's club of a vocational nature, take up a charity, don a white nanny's uniform and play bowls.

Clift contrasts this banal picture with particular 'stylish' women, Colette, 'that Gothic belle Sitwell' and 'that other gothic lady, the Baroness', and elaborates on their style. It is interesting that the 'models' she chooses are all foreign women. Back in Australia now for over four years, she still looks overseas for her inspiration, still feeling that 'the centre' is 'over there'. She is not a migrant, she is a former expatriate, but, like the migrant, she experiences a feeling of loss and regret for the other place wherever she happens to be.

Fantasising about her own old age, Clift romantically pictures herself

> (with) a red wig and a parrot and a silver-topped cane and a fund of risque stories with which to regale my grandchildren, who are bound to adore me.

After this fantasy Clift takes up her theme, the intolerance and ugliness of the Australian 'Old' and, in a breathless, hard-hitting stream of description, she identifies and castigates 'the Olds'.

> But what really distresses me most about being an Old here, now, in Australia, is that I just might, quite inadvertently, be identified with the bigots, the moralists, the reactionaries, the disapprovers of the Youngs. The Olds who rule, who instruct, who

> admonish, who warn, who exhort and preach and censor. The Olds who must envy the Youngs with a bitter corrosive envy to go to such lengths of prurience and authoritarianism.

Clift was always more careful than this in the 'Herald' essays. The 'phenomenon' came about because she could identify with her audience and the audience could identify with her. In 'On Being Middle-Aged', which appeared on 27th January, 1966, for example, she is identified with the Olds. She makes a case for consideration and pleads with the Youngs for understanding.

> Middle-age becomes a familiar territory. One begins to move about in it with confidence, to accept the limitations of its horizons and the fact that time is now calculable.
>
> Only--perhaps it is time for a little reverse in understanding. It would be nice if the beautiful, energetic, careless young could bring themselves to say: 'Forgive them--because they are middle-aged.' Or 'Try to understand them because they are middle-aged.' 'Yes, it is wrong but after all they are only middle-aged.'
>
> They'll get there too one day.[6]

In the Pol essay, Clift identifies herself as an Old but she is very much on the side of the Youngs. Using an image drawn from migration, she presents the Olds as 'really migrants in the Youngs' territory, the Youngs having been born into it and not knowing any other'. The metaphor is extended in what amounts to a plea for understanding and communication. Clift criticises radical conservatism in general and the then premier of New South Wales, Robin (later Sir Robert) Askin, in particular, as she deals with the colloquialisms of the Youngs and the

Olds.

> And of course no communication is possible without at least a smattering of the colloquial language. "Flog 'em!" and "Run over the bastards!" belong to an outdated phrase-book, and do nothing to establish good-will. In fact, such nineteenth century phrases are more likely to bring about active hostility.

Clift quickly balances her argument with a reference to the Youngs as 'those little punks' coupled with illustrations of their fallibility. Continuing the extended metaphor, she dwells on the state of the world and the responsibility the Olds must bear for that. The conclusion shows her bewilderment as she seemingly despairs of humanity and introduces pessimism to her world view.

> Perhaps it is a symptom of being an Old that I think it is infinitely harder, in the present inclement climate of greed and repressiveness on the one hand and woeful human deprivation on the other, to be a Young, inheriting it.

The January article thus concludes with an 'end of life' mournfulness, not obvious in the first article or typical of the 'Herald' essays. POL styled itself as being for 'The Modern Australian Woman' and Walsh could hardly have expected such a pessimistic article. Still, Clift's status and her ability as a communicator were such that she was able to write in whatever mode suited her and make contact with her audience. Because of the nature of magazine publication, particularly when involved with 'ground-breaking off-shore' printing, there was a long delay between editing and 'news-stand'. It was not until the February, 1969 issue of POL that there could be any

response to the appearance of the first issue. Walsh's description of the reaction to Clift's work parallels that of Margaret Vaile speaking of the 'Herald' days. Readers wrote and telephoned about the current Clift article. The February issue, number three, was the first issue that could reflect this and the editorial or 'POL.COL' began with a the following reference:

> This, as Charmian Clift confirms, is a time for astrology, predictions and prophecy.

Clift was now a part of POL. Her article, entitled simply 'FEBRUARY', and carrying her name in highlighted upper case, was the first item in the magazine, illustrated by sophisticated representations of modern city buildings. There is irony in the fact that Clift had written the article as if for a January issue as she, and perhaps the editor, had underestimated the time it would take from editing to completion. She had entitled the piece 'This Way to Megalopolis' and had used the word 'January' four times in the first two paragraphs. 'January' was not changed to 'February' in the article but was replaced by the somewhat vaguer, 'This is the time of the year'. These first two paragraphs thus lose some of their impact though the article is not really about the beginning of the year anyway. The original title, which was restored for the World of Charmian Clift, is far more appropriate as the article deals almost entirely with cities.

The article begins with a consideration of the

approach of the millenium and planners' predictions of what she terms 'megalopoles'. Clift asks the question 'What price Megalopolis as a way of life?' Her concern with the quality of life is evident in this article and provides the theme. From a brief consideration of the great cities of the northern hemisphere Clift progresses to the southern hemisphere in general and Australia in particular. Her style in this article is at times more relaxed and informal than in the previous two POL articles or than in the Herald essays. Clift had developed a facility for gauging her audience and, with the use of colloquialisms, she reproduces a sort of city 'jive-talk':

> It is possible they might all have the screaming heebie-jeebies underneath and accept their jibbering sub-strata as normal too. Like: "Don't everybody?"

Having described the present and possible future city scene, Clift plunges into the past. The link is Aristotle's city ideal of "a common life for a noble end", as she lovingly traces the history of cities for the last seven thousand years. Her own romanticism finds expression here as she evokes the past.

> Cities have always been legends too, and the legends have lingered in words and songs and dreams and inexpressible yearnings long after the cities have returned stone to stone and dust to dust. Where does Atlantis lie? And Eldorado? How many miles to Babylon? Was it really passing brave to be a king and ride in triumph through Persepolis? How tall were the topless towers of Ilium?
>
> The names are music to romantics. Samarkand, Trebizon, Bokhara, Baghdad, Isphahan...

Clift is obviously able to indulge herself in the

medium of POL without the restrictions, real or self-imposed, of the weekly column. From the romantically recalled past, Clift moves to a consideration of what she terms 'Newsydgong', the planners' prediction of an urban sprawl that will encompass everything from Newcastle in the North to Wollongong in the south. It is a cynical consideration and it becomes the vehicle for examination of the human condition and of the shortcomings of planners and planning. She postulates lotteries, that will be necessary 'to finance such needed projects as sewerage and garbage disposal and postal deliveries'. The prize in such lotteries could be a chance for an ordinary citizen, once in his lifetime, to win:

> ...a trip to a fabled Beach, where the great and the wise and the filthy rich will be allocated whole houses with Space around them and walk as they please upon precious sand or stroll under rare natural trees, those curious survivals from another time.

The conclusion is Orwellian in its triumph of the bureaucracy over the human spirit.

> And why should anyone want more than the knowledge that he is part of Newsydgong, living a common life for some end that is the lofty affair of administration?

The allusion to Aristotle's ideal is crushing, the cynicism is heavy, the message is clear, humanity is being neglected for 'planning'. Clift just has time to 'gleefully count' her nostalgic horde of city memories and to dismiss the possible glories of Megalopolis with her comment, the stinging, pessimistic closure:

They can have the beastly place.

The article for the fourth issue in March, 1969 was entitled 'The Modern Artist Pro. or Con?' The colourful presentation ran to four pages and each page carried a geometrical or pseudo-modern art design with Clift's text superimposed. The title really sums up the article in which Clift asks the question: 'Is there a big con trick going on in the world of art?' The article is not just iconoclastic; Clift gives much anecdotal evidence for her feeling that there is some trickery involved and with this she is careful not to merely blame the artists.

> It's a very old story and the lesson is obvious. Yesterday's revolutionaries become today's establishment themselves, but everything goes so fast now and fashions change so quickly and we've been so shamefully and demonstrably wrong before that we are prepared to swallow anything on the assurance that we are displaying fine aesthetic sensibilities in so doing. Our critical faculties are disarmed before we even look. And when we look we may feel uneasily that what is lacking must lie within ourselves.

To put Clift's article into context, it is necessary to look at the 'art scene' in Australia generally and in Sydney in particular in the sixties. John Douglas Pringle's book, Australian Painting Today, had appeared in 1963. The book had been printed in Italy with 31 plates in colour and it represented a sophisticated production for the times. Dealing with a list of artists that includes Charles Blackman, Arthur Boyd, William Dobell, Russell Drysdale, Ian fairweather, Leonard French, Donald Friend, Sidney Nolan, Clifton Pugh and Brett Whiteley, Pringle

offered an historical and contemporary view of Australian art. These names form the 'establishment' nowadays but many of them were associated with the avant-garde at the time. Summing up Australian contemporary art, he says:

> For the most part, Australian painting today is romantic, swift, dashing and emphatic. If it has a fault it is superficiality.[8]

These were not the artists and this was not the superficiality that Clift was attacking. In the sixties in Sydney there was a sudden burgeoning of 'smart' art galleries and an accommodating supply of 'new' art to fill these galleries which charged high commissions to the artists and strongly promoted 'their' artists in what were known as social circles with exhibitions and openings being very much social affairs.[9] It is this aspect of profiteering and manipulation that Clift attacks, accusing the 'vanguard' of painting as not really being a vanguard at all but being merely after 'the quick buck'. She is not just damning 'modern art', going to some lengths to praise 'abstract painting' and then launches her attack as follows:

> To be fashionable is to be establishment. And the op and pop and the cog-wheel-and-bicycle-chain sculpture boys are certainly fashionable. But not -- to me at least, and I suspect to a great many other people who are uninformed but responsive to the interior expressiveness of creative artists -- satisfying.

Clift is once again saying what her audience wanted to hear. She is presenting in a pseudo-intellectual argument, conservative ideas which would have been held by

many of her readers though they would not have expressed them in such a manner. Her ending is quite populist, designed to engender feelings of smugness in the reader.

> ...He's a wake up anyway, like the little boy at the Emperor's procession who cried out from the crowd in amazement: "But he's got nothing on!"

Publishing delays and problems must have been overcome at POL by this stage as the next issue, April 1969, carried a full-page response to the Clift modern art article. The page was titled 'RIPOST', and carried the heading: 'Max Hutchinson, director of Sydney's Gallery A, takes issue with Charmian Clift's article in last POL: "The Modern Artist Pro. or Con?"'

Hutchinson took issue not just with Clift but with the general public and their perception of modern art and with the media. He began by giving his own description of the "fashionable guests" at charity openings describing them as:

> ...conservative, even reactionary, in their tastes; tight with their pockets; very much out of touch with artistic progress, and very much out of practice with their eyes.

He criticised Clift for seeking 'literary connotations in works of art in order to bolster her visual limitations and supply the necessary talking point' and described the media as suffering badly from a lack of serious art criticism. In his 'ripost' of about one thousand words he discussed the history of modern art, its position in Australia, and its problems, summing up as follows:

> The only factors lacking are documentation of sound authentic criticism and assessment and a larger responsive audience.

Clift's article thus generated a thoughtful and serious response, with Hutchinson showing, sadly, the extent to which she was in touch with her audience, putting the case for the 'conservative, even reactionary' art patrons and, like her audience, generally not prepared to accept or buy what was being offered in the avant-garde galleries.

The article for April was put in the Travel Section. It was entitled 'Greek Easter' and illustrated with photos of Greek churches, a priest, an ornate crucifix and some tranquil island scenes. Clift sympathetically evokes the Greek celebration of Easter as experienced by her and her family during the many years they lived on Greek islands. She alludes to Frazer's Golden Bough and Graves' Greek Myths, books which had been so important to the evening discussions of the Johnstons and the Nolans and the small expatriate community in Katsikas' bar as they wintered on Hydra.[10] Clift also invokes the liturgy of the Greek Orthodox Church, but mostly she draws on personal experience, depicting ritual as the all important factor and suggesting that 'observance of form is the key to the strength of the Greek family structure'.

> May wreath and Midsummer Eve fire, the autumn vintage with its ceremonial toss-potting, the blessing of the waters at Epiphany when shivering young men dive into the winter sea to retrieve a gold cross, the weeks of hectic carnival that precede

> Lent, Soul Saturdays for the propitiation of spirits, Clean Monday for purification -- each has its proper time and purpose, each ceremony is always true to itself, yet mysterious, pulsating with life.

Along with her obvious respect for the religious beliefs of the people who were her neighbours and friends, Clift presents her own humanistic pantheism. In the sixties, in Australia, where the divisions were still largely 'WASP' or Irish-Catholic, these were rather sophisticated views, but in this publication they were less likely to stir up controversy than in the Sydney Morning Herald.

> And whether it is Demeter or Saint Demetrios, Saint John or Poseidon the Earth-Shaker, Helios the Sun God or Elijah the Prophet, what does it matter? Christ and Dionysus merge in torn flesh and flowers, and life is resurrected from the dead earth. The pagan world is always there, lingering on, dark and impenitent.

With rich description Clift depicts the whole of Lent as experienced on the island. The language becomes fervent and climactic with the scene that is portrayed. Alliteration, repetition for the purpose of emphasis, image piled upon image, Clift uses every device possible to present the scene and to involve the reader in the experience.

> And every day in Holy Week every bell of every campanile rang for service after service. There was not a church on our island that was not packed with emaciated women, fanatical in this final week of fasting, and almost beside themselves with a mounting sense of tension and excitement. Imminent liberation too, I should think. You couldn't help admiring their fervour and their fortitude, for while they starved the whole island was heavy with the smell of food cooking.

There is no cynicism in the gentle closure,

> 'It was reassurance. And triumph'...Even we, ignorant foreigners that we were, had the strangest feeling that we had helped the year along.

Clift's article stayed in the Travel Section for the next month also. The 'Contents' described the May, 1969 article as 'TRAVEL: Charmian Clift remembers Europe in May'. The illustrations were colour photographs, taken around Goteborg, Sweden by Daniel Agren. In the article, entitled 'Charmian Clift goes Memory Gathering', she asks rhetorically why young Australians 'healthy, ebullient, intelligent, talented, some of them even gifted' head off to Europe. She then sets up the 'bourgeois' establishment reasons for not leaving Australia.

> The pastures here have never been greener, security more secure, opportunities for material advancement greater, hazards fewer. Young people -- with talent or without -- have never had it so good and so promising...

Having thus dismissed the objections in advance, Clift indulges in a paean of praise for travel generally, starting with the eighteenth and nineteenth century Grand Tour and arriving at her own vividly recalled and described memories of the delights of travel. A series of paragraphs, beginning with 'you couldn't imagine beforehand' or 'You could never imagine', conjure up personal pictures of English and then continental scenes. There is some patronising here but Clift is also remembering her own amazement and wonderment and the leaps

her imagination had to take when she herself first came to what she still regarded as the centre of civilisation. Esoteric pieces of information, 'They still call young girls "maidens" there, and use the word "brave" as an ordinary adjective' are interspersed with Clift's delight in remembrance. 'Mercy! What a gathering I gathered. I will feast on it for the rest of my life.' This is pure indulgence and regret for lost youth. The constant consideration of what the audience wanted, characteristic of the 'Herald' essays, is here overwhelmed by personal longing.

Clift finishes her 'tour' with 'No. You couldn't have imagined that.' She states her real awareness of cynicism in the young but 'backs' Europe to 'work on them and wear their bristles down'. The closure is purely nostalgic.

> And they will go gathering, sights and tastes and smells and experiences unprecedented. Like I did once.
>
> And would do again.

For the June, 1969 issue of POL, Clift's article returned from the Travel Section to the front of the magazine with the following referencein the POL.COL:

> ...and Charmian Clift favours us with a few broad thoughts from at home. Charmian's delightful vignette of her husband, George Johnston at the Coronation of Elizabeth is from a bygone age.

The article was entitled 'Royal Jelly' and was illustrated with some black and white cartoons by Rushton.[11] Clift ironically describes Johnston's participation in the

Coronation ceremony, examining the British royal family and summing up with: 'The House of Windsor has not been notable for charisma'. She takes a light-hearted look at royal eccentricities and asks the question 'Has the monarchy run its course?' There is some point to its continuance for tourism, particularly in attracting Americans and American dollars to Britain, but she makes the strong point that not much of this applies to Australia. Her positively republican views find expression in wry denigrating of the monarchy's representatives in Australia.

> The fact of a monarchy gives us seven Governors and a Governor-General, thus, I suppose, providing jobs for persons too eminent or too fastidious to employ themselves further in the fields of commerce or politics, but hardly impinging on the lives of ordinary Australians in any way at all or imparting to them a proper sense of richness and tradition and heritage.

After more in the same wry style, Clift asks, 'Does it matter?' The implied answer is 'No.'[12]

Charmian Clift took her own life on the night of 8th July, 1969. Her July, POL article was entitled 'Winter Solstice'. It is tempting to look in this article and in the two more which had already been written pending publication, for some hint of the tragedy to follow. There is a tragic irony in the title 'Winter Solstice', connotating as it does, the darkest days of the year.

The article consists principally of a remembrance and recreation of past winters, particularly childhood winters beside the creek where Clift grew up in Kiama. The

memories seem to be happy ones, lovingly recalled as Clift brings as many as possible of the senses into play.

> Winter tasted of hot soup and toffee and cocoa, smelled of wet earth and burning box billets, sounded of the elements' horrible pleasure shrieking and whining and howling and drumming, and felt of comfort.

There is regret too, 'There have been many winter solstices since. Many and many of them. Too many perhaps...' Near the end of the article, she quotes from her beloved T.S. Eliot:

> "There are other places which are also the world's end, some at the sea's jaws...
> Where is the summer," he asks, "the unimaginable zero summer?"
> But I ask where is the unimaginable winter?

Clift's closure to 'Winter Solstice' recalls Eliot.

> It's a long way back to the sea's jaws. The world's end.

The August article was also not without irony in its subject and title, 'My Husband George', since Clift took her life after a day of fighting and recrimination with her husband. They had fought bitterly for years while always keeping up a public facade, although their fights were well-known to their friends. As Toni Burgess said: 'She was never a match for him in the Virginia Woolf stakes'.[13] J D Pringle remembers Cynthia Nolan saying about Clean Straw for Nothing: 'Poor Charm. George is killing her with that book'.[14] The terrible irony, as Kinnane points out so clearly, is that she was quite wrong about the book. Johnston's treatment of 'those bad times'

is generous in showing

> Clift's attitude to life to be dignified and right, and his own, in its threadbare David Meredith garb, to be degraded and wrong.[14]

Certainly, for a short while, Johnston blamed himself for her death.[15] Beneath the essay's title, the editor had inserted:

> The following article, by Charmian Clift, was being printed at the time of her death. POL has already conveyed to her husband, George Johnston, our profoundest sympathy with him and his children in their loss.

The title, 'My Husband George', alludes to Johnston's novel My Brother Jack, and in the article Clift describes her husband and their relationship. She is frank, the article reading in parts almost like a confessional, a very condensed one because there is much information and opinion contained in it. Her attempt to describe their differences and their different approaches to writing is revealing.

> ...I have shared a great deal of his experience, and I know too that we both remember the experience quite differently. It affected us quite differently. I suspect it is the difference between optimism and pessimism, but I am not entirely sure. All people have both in varying mixtures. Nobody is absolutely a Yea Sayer and nobody is absolutely a Nay Sayer. I tend to Yea and George Johnston tends to Nay, but then I am a good deal younger than he is, had a much happier beginning and launching into life, and haven't been so sick for so many years.

Clift thus portrays herself as the 'optimistic' partner shortly before she took her own life. Johnston, the apparent pessimist, was to struggle on, in extreme pain and

almost unable to breathe, trying to finish his Meredith trilogy.

'My Husband George' is revealing in the way it traces the evolution of My Brother Jack from the point of view of Clift. For most of the article she is building up the picture of Johnston as a writer and through his writing she evokes the man, the man he was and the man he became. She quotes from Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Sickness broke him", to describe the effect of the tuberculosis on Johnston, and then enlarges on this, suggesting that, in a cruel sort of way, sickness 'made him',linking the physical changes with his spiritual changes. Johnston, and the writing of My Brother Jack, are intertwined with the marriage relationship and the tuberculosis in a concise and personal passage.

> He was, of course, affronted and outraged by the corruption working in his lungs. And there were times when he was affronted and outraged by anybody who didn't have corruption working in his lungs. (Or so it seemed then: it was the impression he gave.) Why did it have to pick on him? Him of all people who had never been sick in his life. I do not like to think much on those years because we almost foundered, but I do like to think on those years because in those years he began to write in a different way. To me a truer way. Perhaps he thought he had nothing to lose any more. Perhaps he thought if people didn't like what he was and what he thought and what he felt they could bloodywell lump him. The necessity to charm, to please, to entertain, to be approved ("Golden Boy" they used to call him), dropped out of his make-up like so much unwanted baggage,...

In a personally revealing sequel to this, Clift discloses the 'spiritual' corruption that has been

'working' in her as the physical corruption worked in her husband's lungs. She makes what seems to be an attempt to deal objectively with Closer to the Sun. In this novel Johnston depicts an Australian married couple, David and Kate Meredith, living on a Greek island that is easily identified with Hydra, with their two children. David Meredith later was to become the protagonist of the My Brother Jack trilogy, though the Clift-based character has a new name. Closer to the Sun deals generally with the marriage problems of the Merediths and particularly with Kate Meredith's love affair and adultery with a young Frenchman, a construct based on Jean-Claude Maurice who appeared also in Peel Me a Lotus. Johnston had used the customary disclaimer 'This is completely a work of fiction', in publication of the book, but the parallels with the Johnston family are quite evident. He had dedicated the book 'For Ketty Christopoulos'.[16]

In the POL article, Clift reveals how much Closer to the Sun has weighed on her mind for all those years since it was published in 1960. She describes the book as 'half-way honest',

> -- that is, honest for half its length, when obviously uncertainty engulfed him and he retreated into storyline and the old trick of dazzling observation. And it was an important novel because it was an exploratory sort of one, feeling out the ground for the one that was to come so many years later -- Clean Straw for Nothing.

Then follows Clift's 'cri de coeur': 'I've been

living with Clean Straw for Nothing for all those years since Closer to the Sun.' She describes sympathetically progress towards the writing of My Brother Jack and gives a detailed description of how she worked with Johnston on that book and how she could not do the same with Clean Straw for Nothing:

> ...while My Brother Jack was being written I sat on the step by his desk every day for seven months so that I would be there when I was wanted for discussion or suggestion or maybe only to listen.
>
> But with "Clean Straw" I've had a complete emotional block, and not all my deep and genuine sympathy at the sight of him struggling and fighting with what was obviously proving to be recalcitrant (sometimes I thought intractable) could force me into the old familiar step-sitting role.

She struggles between her professionalism as a writer and the thought that Clean Straw for Nothing will be so revealing and damaging to her as a person and a writer that it will be unbearable. She relates how she herself finally rang the publisher to 'get rid of the damn thing' and have it published. The closure is sad, particularly in view of the post-humous publication of the article.

> Clean straw for nothing?
> Whatever anybody says, I will read that book myself one day. When I'm brave enough. Or when I feel I've really earned my own small bundle of clean straw.

Clift's final article for POL, in September, 1969, was entitled 'Wine Country'. The editorial page carried a tribute to Clift which conveyed a sense of stunning shock.

> In July we received with a great sense of shock the news of the sudden death of Charmian Clift, who had built herself an enviable reputation as a writer and had in the last few years been an extremely popular columnist with the Sydney Morning Herald.

Charmian had written for POL from its first issue...

This final article is a gentle loving account of a trip she and Johnston made long ago from London to the Bordelais area of France, where, she says, 'we went ...to drink wine'. Clift manages to convey the wonder of the trip and their essential innocence at this time with her question: 'Poor innocents, had we really thought there was a recipe?'

Along with the anecdotal account of the trip to the wine country, Clift gives a potted history of wine, beginning with Dionysus.

> Because the history of the grape begins in religious mystery, with the dark and potent cult of Dionysus who might have done rather more for civilisation than to get young girls wildly tipsy on moonlit mountainsides and go tearing about upsetting the social applecart. The legend of his tendrilled ship and its voyagings may be symbolic, but there is no doubt that the vines of Eleutherae on the slopes of Cithaeron spread through ancient Greece, and then to the Greek colonies, one of which was Massalia (now Marseilles) and from Massalia spread to Bordeaux at least 2000 years ago. And "Saluez!" say I.

The article began with Clift saying that the episode she was about to relate 'has the quality of a fairytale' and, in neat circular fashion, Clift's closure recalls the fairytale. It is a calm and gentle ending to the article and to Clift's writing career and life.

> Well, well. It was a fairytale that spring, and if we did not, as in some fairytales, turn into something else entirely by the end of it, we learned a seemly humility in the presence of mysteries, an abiding respect for natural magic, and a life-long love of good red wine.

NOTES

1. Richard Walsh, Editor POL, interview with GT, 1990
2. POL, 1/1, p.16.
3. Ray Taylor, writer, broadcaster and well-known 'man-about-town' had a reputation as a 'maverick' with a wry sense of humour. He was sacked by the ABC for expressing controversial views and the then managing director issued the instruction: 'This man is never to be employed again by the ABC'. He returned to the ABC in the late 1980s to be the very popular breakfast announcer on radio station 2BL.GT.
4. 'A Death in the Family', I in A, p.115. Cf. note 4, previous chapter, 'Alone'.
5. TILL, p.8.
6. TILL, pp.121-2.
7. N.S.W. Premier Askin's Advice to President Johnson as Vietnam protesters lay down in front of his car in Sydney. GT.
8. J.D. Pringle, Australian painting Today,(Thames & Hudson, London, 1963) p.54.
9. Contemporary and later conversations and discussions with Jeffrey Smart, Tom Bass, Tom Kleghorn and Mike Kitching, all Australian artists and with William Tucker, Pitt Street bank manager who was banker to some of the foregoing and to many other artists at the time. GT.
10. cf. PMAL.
11. Probably Will Rushton, an English comedian and writer who was in Australia at that time enjoying a popular, even 'cult', following.
12. Republicanism has become an issue once again in 1991 in Australia with the move to have Australia become a republic at the beginning of the next century. The arguments going on at this time make Clift's opinions of over twenty years ago seem quite advanced.
13. interview with GK, 1982. Kinnane, p.259.
14. p.277.
15. cf. Kinnane, p.281.
16. see earlier chapter, 'The Novels ii. Honour's Mimic'. The diver Fotis refers to the Clift-like protagonist as 'Ketty'.

C O N C L U S I O N

> Every great and original writer, in proportion as he is great and original, must create the taste by which he is to be relished.[1]

For nearly five years, from 1964 to 1969, Charmian Clift created the taste by which she was to be relished and became for Australia, a 'most astute and popular chronicler of (her) generation'[2]. With Clift's death, Australia lost a unique voice. In 1989, on the re-appearance of The World of Charmian Clift, Ruth Park wrote wistfully about Clift's potential:

> But if she had lived longer, perhaps? Because forty-five is an early age to opt out of the writer's trade.[3]

Nevertheless, Clift's achievement was remarkable. Just as Olga Masters, for example, found her freedom to write creatively by moving on from journalism, so Clift found her freedom by coming back to it. The apprenticeship in the other medium was essential to the level achieved in what turned out to be the final medium.

As a novelist who turned to essay-writing, Clift came to her syndicated column as a skilled writer and communicator. With her wit and erudition she combined an almost infallible sense of what the reader wanted, and she could write, and write beautifully.

As Martin Johnston said of his mother:

> She had a vast range of what used to be called 'curious learning', especially of the sort she most loved: that of Shakespeare, Donne, Burton, Aubrey, Browne and Sterne. She wrote an English that in its love of the long, complicated yet ringing sentence went straight back to those favourite antecedents....[4]

The Charmian Clift Phenomenon came about because this remarkable woman was the writer for her times; she found and exploited the appropriate medium and she had the skills, talent and feeling to communicate with an extremely wide readership. For Australians generally, she charted the 1960s and pointed the way out of much of the dreariness of that decade. For 'housebound' women in particular, Clift provided hope; she was someone who understood their problems, a mother-confessor.

Clift raised personal communicative writing to a level not experienced in Australia before, except perhaps, as Martin Johnston said, in the essays of Walter Murdoch[4], who had this to say on the subject of essay-writing:

> If the essay should come to displace the novel in popular favour, it would be a clear sign of an advance in civilization. When we are prepared to sit down and listen to an easy, informal talk by a wise, humorous, kindly observer of life, without demanding that he shall tell us a story, we show that we are growing up.[5]

After being away from Australia at a time of change, Clift brought to her writing some of the objectivity of the expatriate or migrant. She was able to look freshly at her own country and, with her descriptive powers, enable her fellow countrymen and women to be more perceptive

about their own environment.

As an effective feminist writer, Clift was in the tradition of such Australians as Louisa Lawson and Mary Gilmore but she reached a far wider audience than her predecessors. Her writing pre-dated the feminist works of the late sixties and early seventies and she may be seen to have influenced feminist thinking and prepared the readership to accept the more radical writing which was to follow. Dale Spender sums up this important aspect of Clift's achievement:

> It was a proud and perceptive woman who wrote those weekly columns for the Sydney Morning Herald in the 1960s and whose views were in many respects years ahead of their time: the problems she posed and the way she phrased them heralded the beginning of women's consciousness-raising sessions in the early 1970s.[6]

When I began this study four years ago, Clift's works were not available in the bookshops. Now, thanks to the work of writers such as Nadia Wheatley and Garry Kinnane, and to publishers such as Collins/Angus and Robertson IMPRINT, Clift's personal experience books, novels, essays and some of her short stories are available in fine editions to an increasingly appreciative readership.

From her son Martin comes the last word:

> All too demonstrably, Charmian Clift founded no school. Too bad: but at least it's good to have this selection of her own essays again, to show--no, she'd think that too strong--to suggest how it might be done. We need another of her.[4]

NOTES

1. William Wordsworth. Quoted by Joe David Bellamy, Introduction, Tom Wolfe, The Purple Decades (London: Jonathan Cape, 1983) p.ix.
2. p.xv.
3. Ruth Park, 'Nothing But Writers', p.32.
4. WOCC, pp.8-9.
5. Walter Murdoch, Saturday Mornings (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1931) p.212.
6. Dale Spender, Two Centuries of Australian Women Writers (London: Pandora, 1988) p. 299.

Appendix i: DEATH AND SUICIDE

> I remembered... how absurd once had been the notion of death in connection with any one of us.[1]

The incomplete and unpublished fragments The End of the Morning[2] and Greener Grows the Grass[3] contain evidence of Charmian Clift's early and lifelong obsession with death and all its trappings. These fragments were to be part of the autobiographical novel Clift was working on at her death.

In The End of the Morning Clift relates what appears to be an incident or at least a setting from her childhood. The setting very faithfully reproduces the Clifts' home at Kiama, across the lagoon from the cemetery. Some of the names mentioned in the story are to be found on the headstones in Kiama cemetery.[4]

The family in The End of the Morning is the Clints. This represents a small change from Clift and suggests that the author was keen for readers to be made aware of the autobiographical nature of the incident. The protagonist Sarah, the 'leader of the gang', is a very clear self-portrait.[5]

The fragment begins with a childish evocation of the macabre by the protagonist, Sarah:

> "Holy blood", she chanted inaudibly, sniffing at the day , "holy blood, heart's ease, heart of purple, deep, dark, doom, oh heart of roses, darkly, darkly..."
>
> Sometimes it seemed to Sarah that no-one would <u>ever</u> die in her family....

In the cemetery Sarah and her "gang" clean the graves in a manner which clearly indicates that this is a regular occurrence for them. Clift evokes the mood of this cemetery beside the sea:

> In the hot dusty silence tiny lizards flicked on the burning stones, warily blinking their jewelled eyes. From a dusty tangle near the shed a stained white hand mutely proffered a marble scroll: a chipped white foot spurned the weeds ineradicably rooted.

She finishes the short story (fragment) with the statement:

> she knew that she would never go back to the cemetery again.
> Never ... Not ever...

As <u>The End of the Morning</u> appears to be one of the last 'stories' that Charmian Clift wrote,[6] 'death' was a theme for Clift's writing right up to her own death.

The shattering death of Charmian Clift stunned not only her family but, seemingly, much of Australia. The papers in which her column had appeared had to run special sections to print just a selection of the many letters of tribute they received following the announcement of her death. Almost without exception the tributes mention the

personal nature of the Charmian Clift experience. In the finest tradition of the English Essay, Clift had managed to make all of her readers feel she was writing just for them.

Margaret Vaile ran the last essay written by Clift in its normal place on the publication day after her death. In her own tribute, printed beneath the last essay, Margaret Vaile stressed the humanity and commitment of Charmian Clift's writing.

> "ANYONE for fish and chips?" is Charmian Clift's last article.
> To me, its publication is the best tribute we can pay her.
> The article epitomises her love of Australia - a love that was not blind to its faults, but great nevertheless....
> She met the challenge of youth as she had met so many of life's challenges. She came to grips with it, got to know what it was all about and became one of its champions.
> Charmian Clift was a champion of many causes during her brief life, but most of all she was the champion of the underdog and the little people.
> Let's hope that her words on their behalf will not be forgotten too soon.

Under the heading Suddenly it's too late[7] Anne Deveson wrote a particularly moving tribute that stressed the force and personal impact of Charmian Clift's writing.

> She counted most because she was immensely, wonderfully, vibrantly alive and her own vitality swept you in and along and made you in turn feel more alive.
> She made you feel more and think more and laugh more.
> She had a pagan quality about her that made you realise here was someone who was still in touch with wet sand and sea and sky and raging winds.
> She could write about the corner store or the local pub or cluttered mantelpiece.
> She could take a topic like the fashionable chattering about theatrical obscenities, and wham, punch you in your guts with a scarifying indictment of the real obscenities, the starving refugees in Asia, the famine victims in India, of children maimed and mutilated, of Vietnam des-poiled, of burnt and torn and diseased human flesh, of condoned graft and

> corruption, of callousness and brutality and viciousness.
> She could write "I think of all the obscenities that are being perpetrated all over the world that we can read about quite openly or watch on our television sets."
> And she could make you feel for the moment, ashamed, and then strong in the power and honesty of her compassion.
> She could talk about the dark mysteries of birth and death without embarrassing you and without turning them into dehydrated events, wrapped in sticky sentiment.
> Above all, she could give you an insight into our common hopes and fears and joys and shames, the things that make us all, Lord help us, human beings....

In speaking of his wife's death and of her role as essayist, George Johnston chose to quote from the obituary memoir published in The Sydney Morning Herald by writer-critic Allan Ashbolt.

> Although she was a disciplined journalist-novelist, with a fine command of her craft, one tends to remember Charmian Clift less as a writer than as a person -- or rather as a person for whom writing was merely a way of expressing her own conscience, her own sense of moral values, her own passion for social justice, and above all her own lyrical delight in being alive and belonging to the human race .... she did retain a sort of pagan vitality or inner glow of mischief which illumined her whole personality....
> As a columnist she found, I think, a role eminently suited to her witty and humane outlook.
> She was never a literary lady in any snobbish or even academic sense; she was always closely bound to the life of the normal suburban citizen, and in these weekly essays she displayed an extraordinary capacity for widening the intellectual and emotional horizons of ordinary men and women.... She went straight to the human essence of any problem, straight to what a situation would mean in human happiness or human suffering....

'Lyrical delight in being alive and belonging to the human race', 'pagan vitality.'

'she was immensely, wonderfully, vibrantly alive.'

'met so many of life's challenges.'

They all speak of Clift's vitality, her love of life, her joy in living to the full. How then could this 'vital' woman take her own life?

The reasons for suicide are necessarily very complicated and varied. A lengthy interview with follow-up discussion and correspondence with Robert Hockley[8] has helped illuminate the reasons for suicide in general and for Charmian Clift's taking of her own life in particular. At my request, Robert Hockley read some of Clift's writings, including the essay A Death in the Family. Speaking particularly of the latter work he makes the following comments:

> The essay as a whole seems wholly appropriate as a spontaneous reaction to the news of the death of her brother. There is nothing notably pathological or even anything that could be taken as a definite pointer to suicidal leanings.
> However, with the benefit of hindsight, I will attempt to make any possible links between the statements in the text and her suicide, and elaborate on the significance of each. Perhaps none of them have much significance on their own, but taken together there is perhaps a suggestion of propensity for suicide.
> "We were an alliance, wordless but unquestioned, against the world of adults and authority". "Alliance...against" suggests alienation from the adult world and the authority they presumably practised. This may be a slightly greater than average counter-dependence, but the period she is describing seems to be pre-pubertal and such counter-dependency is unusual at that age unless the authority being exercised is unduly harsh or insensitive to its effects. Teenage "alliance... against" would be quite normal. So here is perhaps a pointer to a less than happy dimension of home life.
> "Cubby house(s)". Again, very normal pastimes. But

the number of cubbies! and the favourite among the aloe plants: "It was a still place, an away place, a place made for secrets." Could this imply that home by contrast was a turbulent place, a place to be "away from", and one where what or how she/they felt could not be expressed? The favourite cubby with its fleshly(!) spears, ...springy... has a prototype in the womb. (The safety and protection experienced in the womb is what some want to regress to, when life becomes unbearable as when someone adopts a "foetal position".) ... Do all cubbies of all children represent a wish to regress to the womb? This is where the significance gets difficult. Perhaps the key question is whether the regressive motif of the cubby is remarkable for Charmian Clift at this time (bereavement is a regressive experience) or, more importantly, in comparison with other children. A hint of the aloe cubby being remarkable is provided by the "...favourite, according to some mysterious law of preference which we understood perfectly at the time." If the drawing represents the cubby well, or better still is her own sketch[9] then there is some reinforcement of this line of thinking from the vagina-like portals, the spears and palisade representing the pubic hair protecting the entrance.....on its own, such interpretation must be considered very speculative.[10]

"the family compulsion to excel" seems very significant. Expectations from the family were high, demanding possibly. But people develop compulsive (usually linked with obsessive) tendencies without parents placing high expectations on them or modelling such behaviour. Such patterns can develop from frustration or not having basic needs met and this is the more likely source. Charmian Clift was certainly making great demands on herself. "anything other than grandeur was too ridiculous to contemplate" and "obsessed as I was by my own feverish impatience to get on to the first prizes". For many people such obsession is one of the pre-conditions for suicide.

"...for some particularly dangerous piece of devilment I had led him into and left him to take the blame for..." This might refer to no more than one or two incidents of childish daring. But it might also suggest a level of risk taking that is unusually high -- tempting fate, playing with fire, risking life. It suggests that Charmian Clift was apt to flirt with danger and take risks that are potentially destructive to herself and her brother.

Robert Hockley notes that Charmian does not use her brother's name in the essay. This is very unusual for a tribute at the time of his death. Was her brother Barre a persona to her rather than a person?

In his work Iberia[11], James A. Michener comments on the suicide of Ernest Hemingway. These comments have some significance with regard to the suicide of creative people generally and writers in particular.

> Especially the suicide. Hemingway's whole public life was dedicated to the creation of a legend. And a legend with certain implications. Therefore, the suicide must not be seen as the act of a casual individual but as the culmination of a carefully prepared legend.
> I think he acted properly. He had built himself into a legend and when it showed signs of blowing up in his face he ended it with distinction.

It has been shown,in the chapters on the essays, how carefully Clift built up her persona for the essays. It was this persona which accounted in part for 'The Charmian Clift Phenomenon'. After a day of intoxication and bitter fighting,[12] the death 'upon the midnight', quoting from Keats, must have seemed more romantic and acceptable than the bitter present from which there probably appeared to be 'no escape'. Death by her own hand would have the potential to create 'a Charmian Clift Legend'. This has to some extent occurred as Clift is still regularly spoken of today as 'the one who committed suicide'.

One has to take into account also the suicides of

Charmian Clift's personal friends Pat Flower and Cynthia Nolan, creative women, married to creative men. They took their own lives in a similar fashion and at a similar age to Clift. There is also the apparent suicide of her daughter Shane, the reported suicide of Johnston's daughter Gae and Martin Johnston's death in which excessive drinking played an important part. Given all these deaths and remembering that Johnston himself continued to smoke and drink against doctor's advice long after he had contracted tuberculosis, it is reasonable to look for connections and patterns.

"Better death a thousand times than gradual decay of mind and spirit"[13] is a sentiment that would be well-known to the people we are discussing. Clift's daughter Shane apparently took her own life not long after the death of her parents, being found dead on a Sydney beach, following a series of unfortunate liaisons and happenings. To further add to the tragedy, George Johnston's daughter Gae by his first marriage took her own life in recent times. She had wanted to be 'accepted' by Clift but this had never happened.

Edwin Schneidman in his Voices of Death has made a detailed study and analysis of a large number of actual suicide notes. It is Clift's suicide note which frustrated the attempts of well-meaning associates to classify her death as accidental. After his study, Shneidman summed up

the suicidal person in the following way:

> Of course, no one commits suicide who is not, in some way and to some heightened extent, intellectually or emotionally distraught but these perturbations can take the form of the passions of unrequited love, intellectual self-assertion, shame and guilt related to disgrace, the wish to escape from the pain of insanity, the wish to spare loved ones from further anguish, and a sense of inner pride and autonomy connected to one's own fate and the manner of one's own death.[11]

With the exception of "pain of insanity", the attributes of the suicidal person seem to fit Clift's case. Even this, however, may have been a factor in her mind following the screaming argument with her husband, described by Kinnane.

> Vile accusations were topped by viler ones, reaching a pitch of terrible hysteria until they each made their way, exhausted, to bed.[12]

The passions of unrequited love were certainly there. There is much evidence that the Johnstons were a particularly passionate couple, their demonstrations of love often proving embarrassing to friends. The descriptions of their love-making are erotically poetic in Clean Straw For Nothing, particularly during the idyllic time spent in Kiama (Lebanon Bay). George Johnston's impotence in his later years is well-established and was an obsession with him and certainly fed his jealousy. Clift confessed to Toni Burgess the serious affair with a Sydney man shortly before her suicide[12] and Johnston taunted Clift about the affair which she described to

Burgess as "the only serious affair I've ever had". These words in themselves express a desperation. The affair with Anthony Kingsmill on Hydra just before the return to Australia is well-known. This affair almost led to the family not coming to Australia to join Johnston.

Clift's self-perceived loss of youth and beauty would seem to be an important factor in her suicide. Physical beauty had always been of such importance to her. The winning of the Miss Pix contest set her off to 'conquer the world'. Her beauty was legendary and she had an often remarked stunning ability to turn all heads and hold the males in any group entranced. The adoration of people such as Peter Finch and a string of admirers all counted for much with Clift.

In her unfinished work Greener Grows the Grass, Clift portrays herself as Christine Morley and describes the meeting with Johnston who, in her work, is Martin Smith.[15]

> I think she could probably be a very great writer if she didn't let men get at her so much. She's too good-looking, and it's always easier to go dancing and drinking than sit at home and work.

The availability, consumption of and addiction to drugs, alcohol, cigarettes and barbiturates is extremely important in looking at Clift's suicide. Pat Flower, Cynthia Nolan and Shane Johnston all apparently took their lives by means of barbiturates.

The last factor mentioned by Shneidman, above, seems extremely important, viz.: a sense of inner pride and

autonomy connected to one's own fate and the manner of one's own death.

Certainly, the remembered version of the suicide note, with its literary allusion and quotation from Keats, is somewhat histrionic: "I shall cease upon the midnight with no pain". Pain there was and she and her husband were unhappy.

Thus, while not necessarily premeditated in any conscious sense, the ending Clift chose for herself was neat and melo dramatic. The literary quotation is important. There were so many people dependent upon Clift at this time and she could have written messages for her family but she chose, in this moment of great stress, to write a literary note which would have seemed likely to reinforce and perpetuate the Clift persona. The 'Gothic' aspect of this suicide, embracing death in this way as a release, must also have seemed attractive to Clift at this time.

Her loss was deeply felt and indeed is still felt today, as was evidenced in the letters quoted in the introductory chapter, 'Kindred Spirits'. I append some of the tributes printed in the special 'Letters to the Editor' section of The Sydney Morning Herald.

* * * *

...each week her column in "The Sydney Morning Herald" reached us as sanity, a different perspective....encouragement to widen the scope of our vision.

She had courage, humour,compassion, honesty. And love. How she loved her country and its people! Otherwise why bother to take us to task? To George Johnston and your children our thanks for being so generous as to share her with us.

* * * * *

Not only was Charmian Clift in my opinion the best woman columnist, if not the best columnist Australia has ever produced, but she had a quality in her writing that left her readers feeling they had not so much read an article, as spent a few minutes with a valued friend. [quoted in part by George Johnston in his introduction to The World of Charmian Clift]

* * * * *

Entirely because of Charmian Clift I became an inveterate reader of the Women's Section of the "Herald" over the past few years. The warmth, humanity, wit and wisdom of her weekly articles were a joy to read, and at times profoundly moving.

* * * * *

A sad hurrah for Charmian Clift - one of our most human and down-to-earth writers.

* * * * *

Vale Charmian Clift!

Thank you for the privilege of knowing you through your weekly column, carried on often through so much adversity.

Thank you for giving us good literature to read that was not warped or cynical, but beautifully thought out and carried through to perfection.

Thank you for raising so gently many issues that the sterner sections of the paper so blindly ignored.

Thursday won't be Thursday any more for a long time.

* * * * *

The passing of Charmian Clift was a great loss to the progressive Greek community in Australia where she was known for her opposition to the military junta at present ruling Greece. As an honorary vice-president of the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Greece, she

had endeared herself to the Greek people of this country. Every Greek democrat is mourning her premature death and is inspired by her example and her struggles for the dignity of man.)

* * * * *

After Charmian's death, George Johnston said that they were always prepared for death in their family but it was his death they were prepared for, not his wife's. The same could be said for Clift's devoted readers. They were unaware that behind the Charmian Clift Phenomenon was a desperately unhappy woman. The persona had seemed genuine, 'a real person speaking, and speaking to me'.[16]

> ...nobody knew the wild joyous little girl from Kiama very well... As she herself says in her beautiful study of her mother, in both her life and her writing, she was never less than ardent.[16]

NOTES

1. I in A, p.36.
2. MS 5027, George Johnston, National Library.
3. MS 7839, Charmian Clift, National Library.
4. A question to one of Charmian Clift's childhood schoolmates, Mrs Gloria Gorman (nee McCabe), during an interview at her home in Canberra (February, 1989) revealed that Charmian did in fact spend much time in the Kiama Cemetery cleaning the tombstones and graves. Mrs Gorman also corroborated that many of the names mentioned in the fragment were the actual, or thinly disguised, names of Kiama people of Clift's time.
5. The description of Sarah as "vacant-eyed, loose-mouthed behind the wisp of hair" (EOTM, pp.1- 2) fits in with the recalled image of Charmian in her youth (interview with the Misses Hayes, lifetime residents of Hothersal St Kiama, the very short street where the Clifts' two houses were).

The description also tallies with George Johnston's description of Cressida Morley in My Brother Jack:

> Nor, in those days, was anything quite under control, neither eyes nor mouth...(MBJ, p.342, also quoted by Kinnane) and again in CSFN, p.58.

6. Interview with Nadia Wheatley, December, 1988. GT.
7. Sun-Herald, 13.7.69, Anne Deveson's obituary for Charmian Clift.
8. Vice-president of the National Association for Loss and Grief; psychotherapist in private practice; masters degree in pastoral theology [psychology and counselling] Princeton; post-graduate work Medical College of Virginia.
9. The drawing is by close friend Cedric Flower whose wife, also a close friend of Charmian Clift, also committed suicide in a similar way. GT.
10. This is not so speculative as Clift refers frequently in EOTM, the story she was working on at her death, to a character named 'Creeping Jesus'. Creeping Jesus was a favourite companion in the aloe cubby and Clift explains why:

> Creeping Jesus was a (sic) snivelling and feeble-minded, almost as old as Cordelia [the Margaret Clift figure] She liked playing doctors better than anything. Ben and I despised her, but she was fascinating to us because she had pubic hair already...MS 7839 CHARMIAN CLIFT, NATIONAL LIBRARY.

11. James A. Michener, Iberia, (Greenwich, Conn. Fawcett Publications, 1968) pp.590-1.
12. Kinnane, pp.279-81. I am indebted to Garry Kinnane for all the information about Clift's death and the events immediately preceding it.GT.
13. E.S.Turner's review of Happiest Days by Jeffrey Richards on p.882 of the Times Literary Supplement, August 12-18, 1988.

14. Edwin Schneidman, Voices of Death, Personal Documents From People Facing Death (New York: Harper & Row, 1980 [Bantam Books, 1982]) pp.43-4.
15. Quoted in Kinnane, pp.77-8.
16. Ruth Park, 'Nothing But Writers', The Independent Monthly, September, 1989, pp. 32-3.

Appendix ii. K I A M A I N D E P E N D E N T

Charmian Clift and George Johnston paid a visit to Kiama in 1964 after their return to Australia. Reprinted below are:

i. The cryptic reference in the 'Gossip Column' announcing Clift's return.

ii. The article in The Kiama Independent describing the visit.

iii. The commissioned article, 'Home Town Revisited', written by Clift for The Kiama Independent.

i. 'AROUND THE BLOWHOLE'

Expected to pay a visit to Kiama this weekend is a former local girl whose name has become known around the world.
Who is she?
Sorry, but I'm going to leave you to gnaw your fingernails over it until Tuesday when we hope to publish an interview and photo.
Rick Stevens

ii. KIAMA INDEPENDENT, November 24, 1964.

"SENTIMENTAL" VISIT BY FAMOUS AUTHOR
MAY BUILD "RETREAT" AT KIAMA

A former Kiama girl who has achieved world fame as a novelist came home on a visit at the weekend.
She is Charmian Clift, who was accompanied by her also famous author husband, George Johnston.
It was Miss Clift's first visit to Kiama since she left here about 17 years ago.
The couple returned to Australia a few months ago after

living in Europe for 15 years, 10 of them in the Aegean.
Miss Clift said sentiment was the main reason for her visit.
But she and her husband were also planning to build a "writers' retreat" in or near Kiama, where they could work in peace and quiet.
She is now writing a new novel, "To the End of the Morning", based on her childhood in Kiama. Miss Clift's parents were the late Mr. and Mrs. Sydney Clift. Her father, who was employed as an engineer at the Railway Department's blue metal quarries, died here in 1946. Her mother died in Sydney later. Both are buried in Kiama cemetery.
Miss Clift attended Kiama Primary School and later Wollongong High School.
After leaving school her first job was as a typist with Kiama Motors, then owned by Mr. Neil Hindmarsh.
She met her husband when they both worked on the Melbourne Argus.
The first book on which they collaborated, "High Valley", was written in Kiama when he spent about seven months here in 1946, and won the Sydney Morning Herald literary prize in 1948. Since then they have collaborated on two other highly successful books, "The Big Chariot" and "The Sponge Divers", and she has written a number of her own, including "Walk to the Paradise Gardens", "Honour's Mimic", "Mermaid Singing" and "Peal (sic) me a Lotus".
Mr. Johnston has written 25 books, including the three they produced together.
They have three children -- two sons aged 17 and eight and a daughter aged 16.
Mr. Johnston and Miss Clift (although she retains her maiden name as an author, she likes to be called Mrs. Johnston as a wife) are currently engaged in giving lectures, making documentary films and writing articles in Sydney.
Mr. Johnston is also busy on another book, which he hopes to complete when they build their "retreat".
In an interview at the Brighton Hotel, where they spent the weekend, Miss Clift recalled happily her childhood days in Kiama.
Amongst memories were outings with her father, who was a keen fisherman and how she loved to dive overboard from his boat and swim in the sea.
"HASN'T CHANGED"
How did it feel to be back in Kiama after living in Europe?
"It feels marvellous," she said. "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."
Mr. Johnston, who was born in Melbourne, had this to say:
"I've just been on a trip around Australia and have seen

hundreds of towns, including highly-praised places, 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."
Asked whether anyone in Kiama recognised her, Miss Clift laughed. "Oh, yes! I've met many people I remember and who remembered me."
Evidence of this was the number of people who broke into the interview in the Brighton Lounge to greet her and her husband.
FOOTNOTE: The Independent shortly will publish a special article which Charmian Clift has undertaken to write for it.

iii. KIAMA INDEPENDENT, Friday December 11, 1964. (Front page with photo)

HOME TOWN REVISITED

My late father, Sydney Clift, was a very dogmatic man, as doubtless many of his old friends and workmates will remember. In our childhood and youth he used to be given to say among other then chant (sic) (trenchant?) pronouncements, that Kiama air would be worth a fortune if only someone could bottle it and get out a patent.

At that time, being eager to breathe more exotic air than that of a small country town, I put it down to his parochialism, for he was indeed a very biased man about all things local -- possibly because he was English anyway and therefore Kiama was his by choice rather than any accident of birth.

Now, having just returned from a sentimental pilgrimage to my birthplace, I am inclined to agree with him.

I know that sentiment is heady seasoning and hometown air is unique whether it is flavoured with factory soot or eucalyptus leaves. But it was incredibly good to breathe Kiama air again, and it is special -- something between tangy and sweet, a mixture of kelp and clover, rich earth and sea-brine.

More than anything, I realise how beautiful Kiama is as a town, and I have lived in some very beautiful places since I grew up there. In retrospect it seems incredibly silly that I returned to my home-town in trepidation, half-fearful that nothing would be as I had remembered it for so many years in so many strange places.

Selfishly, I miss the little blue-metal train that used to rattle up the main street so enchantingly and the old

Oddfellows' Hall with all its nostalgic memories of concerts, dances, recitations, physical culture displays and the Showground Pavilion with its attendant chain of nostalgia for cricket matches, football matches, maypole dances where I never ever -- alas -- was chosen May Queen.

Selfishly, also, I deplore the new housing developments, but that is only because they lessen the range of choice for myself.

It was good, too, to see so many of the old faces -- people with whom I grew up, went to school, played as a child on that gorgeous expanse of salmon pink sand called Bombo Beach. Apart from any other remarkable properties, Kiama air must have a very special preservative, since nobody looks a day older than they did seventeen years ago, which was the last time I was a resident.

I can remember so well (and several people reminded me of this) that as a child I used to swear that I would get out from that small town and go and see the world.

It would be untrue to say that I am sorry I did. But I am so glad to have had the opportunity to come back.

CHARMIAN CLIFT.

.....

Kiama-born Miss Clift recently paid her first visit home after 17 years during which she has travelled widely and won fame as an author.

In this article, written specially for the "Independent", she describes her reaction to her homecoming.

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