

A Great Man: Manning Clark *

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ABSTRACT: Charles Manning Hope Clark was an influential writer not only in his native Australia, but for the world. However, his acumen in detailing with the significance of the 'historical' facts and truths has been used as an indictment against him—that this man's style should not be taken seriously as a guide—for any country. Yet when the proper context is given, for Clark wrote in an epic manner, his work retains its authenticity. Also, when his corpus is compared to those who have changed the fields of history and fiction, this same point is perceived to be true.

Assessing such a one's proper status is difficult. In addition, the more time passes, the myth grows (and not always purposely). Unless, that is, that the person, via sheer audacity, transcends any artificial enclosure and can be deemed a Great Man. One who 'enlightens, who has enlightened the darkness of the world: and this not as a kindled lamp only, but rather as a natural luminary shining by the gift of heaven.'¹ This is the one category that Charles Manning Hope Clark fits well.

Clark is the historian of all things Australian. Indeed, he created for Australians, and the rest of the world, a view of Australia with its own identity.

From the time of European settlement in the late eighteenth century, Australians tried to frame their experiences in the manner of Britons. Their history was simply a part of the history of the British Empire. In the mid-twentieth century, however, some Australians began to question the assumption that their history was made for them in Britain.'²

* *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, 'One comfort is, that Great Men, taken up in any way, are profitable company. We cannot look, however imperfectly, upon a great man, without gaining something by him. He is the living light-fountain, which it is good and pleasant to hear.' Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1993), p. 3. Though I am using Carlyle's idea of a Great Man, this should not be construed as an endorsement of gendered subjects. Great Women embody the same attributes.

¹ Carlyle, pp. 1-2.

² Marnie Hughes-Warrington, *Fifty Key Thinkers on History* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 31-32.

Further, being one who questioned agreed upon moralities and narratives, made him a more transcendent luminary—he made those of us who are not Australians (or his milieu) want to claim him as our own.

An historian is someone who researches and writes about the past. But Clark understood that for the historian to have lasting influence meant more than listing dates and landmarks. ‘[If Australian] history is not interesting [then] make the events romantic.’³ This is in keeping with the thought of another rebellious historian, American James W. Loewen, who wrote ‘Emotion is the glue that causes history to stick’⁴ That desire (one the reader has as well), for the ‘romantic’ is a central ingredient in Clark’s work. Yet to better comprehend his ability, he should be compared to others who share similar traits, such as faithfulness to the craft (fiction writers) and the ability to fill existing voids with inclusive historical narratives.

Manning Clark’s personal history was messy (including his inheritance of allegiance to ‘historical’ facts), yet it held true to a certain type of moral fidelity no less serious than Joseph Conrad’s. ‘Those who read me know my conviction that the world, the temporal world, rests on a few very simple ideas; so simple that they must be as old as the hills. It rests notably, among others, on the idea of Fidelity.’⁵

Conrad’s own faith in the written word, as shown in his narratives, gave us the ‘history’ of those places—exploited and ‘dark.’ This was Clark’s religion; an apt substitute for fidelity:

The thing a man does practically believe (and this is often enough without asserting it even to himself, much less to others); the thing a man does practically lay to heart, and know for certain, concerning his vital relations to this mysterious Universe, and his duty and destiny there that is in all cases the primary thing for him, and creatively determines all the rest. That is his religion.⁶

Clark’s sense of ‘fidelity’ to the word was no less pronounced than Conrad’s, but his mission was to reclaim and see Australian history as an epic⁷ but also with ‘highly original and insightful portraits of its great men with their tragic flaws.’⁸ This was not to embarrass or shame, but to

³ Manning Clark, *Diary* (1964). ‘Papers of Manning Clark, MS 7550.’ National Library of Australia WEB 1/09/2016. Web.

⁴ James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American Textbook Got Wrong*, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), p. 342.

⁵ Joseph Conrad, preface, *A Personal Record, by* (1912; New York: Doubleday, 1924), p. xxi.

⁶ Carlyle, p. 4.

⁷ J.S. Ryan, ‘A History of Australia as Epic’ *Manning Clark: Essays on His Place in History*, ed. by Carl Bridge (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1994), p. 61.

⁸ Glenn Davies, ‘The History Man: Manning Clark centenary—1915-2015,’ *Independent Australia* 11 March, 2015: p. 1, 12/1/16. Web.

examine ‘our doubts and uncertainties on the one hand and our hopes and dreams on the other.’⁹ Indeed, this journey was also Clark’s being, for his life was as tortuous and celebratory as the people and land he logged and wrote about. ‘While Clark’s concept of history has disturbed many who do not see its subjective conscience as a valid way of knowing the past, his work is written as the epic poets in particular chose to write for their contemporaries about dubious contemporary values and greater ideals.’¹⁰

Though sometimes sharp, Clark’s work was never dour. His felicity worked alongside his depictions, giving those historical figures a presence that many other historians could not. He knew those figures had to be memorable to persuade a larger audience to invest their time in close scrutiny of those lives and actions. Of Philip Gidley King and those around him he wrote;

By birth, training and temperament, King was equipped to reap what others had sown, rather than to plant the first seed. All his life he was driven to find similar dodges to bridge the gap between desire and capacity, because he was not prepared to sustain his station in life by great thrift or meanness.¹¹

Here we have someone who is made into not only a round character, but someone with such flaws, and so a figure dramatic—as only a human can be. Of those, King employed a ‘senior military officer, William Paterson, whom he found to be a weak, honest man, who would do the right thing if he acted from his own ideas of right and wrong, but weakness made it easy for others to use him as a knave’s tool.’¹² Clark’s assessment went on:

As Judge Advocate he had Richard Atkins, who acquitted himself very well when not addicted to the bottle. As senior chaplain he had the Reverend Samuel Marsden. King complimented Marsden as the best practical farmer from the colony, but was discreetly silent about his powers to wean his charges from vice.¹³

These are noted leaders of Australia’s past, but as with other countries’ history, much is lost for the usual factual reading, though economic, do not stir passionate attention. Clark’s ability, however, to do that is incredible—if we can compare it to another.

⁹ Davies, ‘The History Man,’ p. 2.

¹⁰ Ryan, pp. 68-69.

¹¹ C.M.H. Clark, *A History of Australia*, vol. 1 (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1962), p. 160.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

¹³ *Ibid.*

In Herman Melville, in insightful contrast, In ‘Bartleby the Scribner,’ the main characters are contradictory—they wish to be, proficient, professional, yet are quixotic; trapped (in their class) which, in tone and fanciful dynamics, are as interesting as those Clark renders. ‘Turkey was a short, pousy Englishman, if about my own age.’¹⁴ When working in the morning, he was a talented worker. However, the afternoon caused him to be ‘incautious in dipping his pen in his inkstand. Indeed, not only would he be reckless and sadly given to making blots in the afternoon, but some days he went further and was rather noisy.’¹⁵ Nippers, his second employee ‘was a whiskered, sallow, and upon the whole rather practical-looking young man,’¹⁶ who was ‘the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion.’¹⁷ The narrator assesses Nipper’s personality this way: ‘The ambition was evinced by a certain impatience of the duties of a mere copyist, as unwarrantable usurpation of strictly professional affairs, such as the original drawing up of legal documents.’¹⁸ The two worked well for ‘the irritability and consequent nervousness of Nippers were mainly observable in the morning. So that, Turkey’s paroxysms only coming on about twelve o’clock, I never had to do with their eccentricities at one time.’¹⁹ Melville pushed the reader to reflect, in how we work with others, and the environment around us. Clark’s epics expected the same from us.

Melville, like Conrad, had command of the written word, but also the words we need to make the narrative persuasive. Their characters, settings, become our own because we do more than visualize them; we see ourselves there, witnessing the affairs. Novelists must be able to learn and control this feat. Manning Clark, giving Australia and the world beyond, the sublime of Australia writ large, also had this ability. And he did it in his historical works—a subject not always given to sweeping, passionate depictions or renditions of people as well fleshed out characters. He knew this secret:

Fiction is history, human history, or it is nothing. But it is also more than that; it stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based on documents, and the reading of print and handwriting—on second-hand impression. Thus fiction is nearer truth. But let that pass. A historian may be an artist too, and a novelist is a historian, the preserver, the keeper, the expounder, of human experience.²⁰

¹⁴ Herman Melville, *Bartleby and Benito Cereno* (Mineola: Dover, 1990), p. 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁰ Joseph Conrad, *Notes on Life and Letters* (London: Dent, 1921), pp. 20-21.

This is why Clark can be deemed a beacon of clarity and inclusion, giving context to dates and places.

However, in the quest we are left with questions concerning his veracity (and/or acumen). Also, since it now appears he was a master storyteller—how truthful. Clearly, the role of the historian (as other roles and titles) has changed, again, which has been its constant.

The century that preceded the 1899 publication of *Heart of Darkness* was the great century of historiography; that is to say, the one in which history sought to become a science. In medieval times events in history had been seen as exempla: as illustrations of moral laws or truths. Relying on the sense of time that allowed anticipations of Christianity to be read into the ancient world and the Old Testament, historians in the Middle Ages had placed an event in the past on the same temporal plane as the present. Past and present events were interchangeable, capable of being interpreted to exhibit a moral truth to guide behaviour. With the advent of a self-consciously modern age in the Renaissance, this sense of time began to alter.²¹

And along with this new ‘sense of time,’ the type of chronicler and the manner events and people are recorded also changes. Clark was an historian of the highest order—of behaviour, hopes and dreams. Also, a moral theologian.²² Albeit, not all sectors were (or now) happy with his involvement—a universal theme, that those who counter official doctrine are not welcome.

Australia has not been alone in its inhabitants questioning the historical narrative which undergirds its legitimacy and ‘place.’ Yet the debate goes beyond a simple question of can minority ideas (and/or voices) dissent from majority history—and those points still be recognized. There can be true concern over guilt, culpability, and a complete repudiation of past ‘accomplishments’, if those actions are thought of as wrong or illegal. Loewen gives an example of such by switching the positions of American ‘the colonists’ and natives peoples.

If we cast off our American-ness and imagine we come from, say, Botswana, this typical sentence (from *The American Journey*) appears quite jarring. ‘In 1637 war broke out in Connecticut between settlers and the Pequot people.’ Surely the Pequots, having lived in villages in Connecticut probably for thousands of years, are ‘settlers.’ The English were newcomers, having been there for at most three years; traders set

²¹ Brook Thomas, ‘Preserving and Keeping Order by Killing Time in *Heart of Darkness*,’ *Heart of Darkness: A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism*, ed. by Ross C Murfin (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1989), pp. 237-238. This source was also used in my 2014 Dissertation: Three Contemporary Australian/ Australia-exposed Thinkers: Mudrooroo, Sally Morgan, and Epeli Hau’ofa, University of New England.

²² Ryan, p. 69.

up camp in Windsor in 1634. Replacing settlers by whites makes for a more accurate but ‘unsettling’ sentence. Invaders is more accurate still, and still more unsettling.²³

Such a scenario can be very upsetting indeed. Just as Clark when he addressed a Yale conference saying,

I am ready, and so are others, to understand the Aboriginal view that no human being can ever know heart’s ease in a foreign land, because in a foreign land there live foreign ancestral spirits. We white people are condemned to live in a country where we have no ancestral spirits.²⁴

In this sense then, the newer democracies, for Australia is not alone, are celebrated as being free places—now that the invaders have won. Such claims were not new. ‘Some white men have known from the beginning of European settlements in 1788 a guilt about the violence and cruelty with which they drove the original inhabitants from their land.’²⁵ Though the deeper crisis (question) is one of legitimacy. ‘Now some white Australians have got beyond facing the truth about the ‘coming of the strangers’. They are now tormented by a new doubt; have they a legal or moral right to be here in Australia?’²⁶ Such statements made him, in some conservative locations, suspicious.

Clark was critical—so much that he is also remembered for being divisive, writing, ‘Australia could be civilised only by violence. Australia’s first white gods were the lash and the gallows. Australia knew the abomination of flogging.’²⁷

One who takes such a position, even without and before terms like a/the ‘Black Armband’ view of history can seem very controversial. Indeed, concerning native peoples, Clark wrote ‘Whatever the reason may have been, the failure of the Aborigines to emerge from a state of barbarism deprived them of the material resources with which to resist an invader, and left them without the physical strength to protect their culture.’²⁸ He went on to write,

Other peoples have recovered from the destruction of their culture, but that of the aborigines was to wither when in contact with other races; for the aborigine was also endowed with a tenacious, if not unique inability to detect meaning in any way of life other than his own; and by one of

²³ Loewen, pp. 94-95.

²⁴ C.M.H. Clark, *Speaking out of Turn: Lectures and Speeches, 1940-1991* (Melbourne; Melbourne UP, 1997), p. 144.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

those ironies in human affairs it was this very inability to live outside the framework of his own culture that prevented any subsequent invaders from using the aborigine for their own purposes.²⁹

This still culminated in destruction ‘It protected the aborigine from such slavery or some form of forced labour, but at the price of the total destruction of the Tasmanian aborigine, and the gradual destruction of aboriginal culture on the mainland.’³⁰

Clark’s task was not a usurper’s. He wanted a more enlightened Australia, not much different than another historian who caused consternation in the late 1980s to late 1990s. American scholar (albeit born and raised in England), Martin Bernal, best fits into the location of Clark.

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Compare Martin Bernal

In the US, Martin Bernal³¹ wrote a three volume set titled *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*. His theory reframes the idea of ancient Greek exceptionalism, arguing their founding principles owe a large debt to Egyptian and Phoenician thought. This would alter the narrative that the ‘West’ owing its accomplishments to all things Greek. One noted critic of this idea, Mary Lefkowitz³² wrote against such sentiment, mainly using a ‘Geoffrey Blainey’³³ position; that what ‘we’ believe/agree on now is (finally) deemed right and good and authentic truth/history. Everything else is propaganda.³⁴

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ A political historian, but intellectual nomad who became interested in Antiquity—not to belittle those accomplishments, but recast them in a more inclusive light with ancient Asiatic and African cultures.

³² An American classical scholar and Professor Emerita of Classical Studies at Wellesley College.

³³ Lefkowitz, in *Not Out of Africa: How Afrocentrism Became an Excuse to Teach Myth as History* (New York: New Republic Book, 1997), though begrudgingly admitting that ‘something’ intelligible, of Egyptian heritage, at some time, probably passed into Greek culture sidesteps the wider issue. If history (actions and consequences) are important, then all must be weighed and admitted then concluded. Minimizing one plight does not sway very many, and casts doubt upon those who would use it as a tactic. George Blainey, in how he categorized Aborigine troubles, seems to have been not with malice, but ambivalence. Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* [2003] (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2004), pp. 128-132.

³⁴ Lefkowitz uses the denial of the Jewish Holocaust to great success. ‘The events of this century have shown that it is dangerous to allow propaganda to usurp truth.’ (p. 155) However, she does not accept or acknowledge such a maneuver has occurred not with mere racist or anti-Semites, but democratically elected, Western and they would say, enlightened governments, if that position were more palatable—if it helped create a national narrative. The United States, for example, has included and excluded native

As controversial as can be thought, what seemed even more unforgivable was that Bernal did not seem to be ‘right’ person to make such a claim.

Lefkowitz is ‘concerned with who has the right, who is privileged, to participate in the construction of both history and knowledge. If this seems to be an argument only peopled by classicists, Afrocentrists, and their critics, the questions involved in the privileging of certain histories and constructions of knowledge should resonate for world historians when they consider Eric Wolf’s title and its implications: *Europe and the People Without History*.’³⁵

Lefkowitz underscores the real argument of *Not Out of Africa*, which is an exclusive one.

What must their credentials be? Clearly, ‘amateurs’ need not apply. Bernal is clearly credentialed and must be recognized and contended with (never mind that his argument is the same as that of those who have been ignored or summarily dismissed; never mind if they are his inspiration and source).³⁶

The problem is not wanting to know if the writer is qualified, but the ‘credentials’ Lefkowitz alludes to—are those conservative historians—ones she believes are correct would be the only group to qualify—do have. This reduces the quality of her argument.

Clark has been ‘classified’ in the same manner, since his research has been deemed not calculating, or academically evidentiary, or absolute³⁷ enough. Yet what is ‘agreed’ upon is not always the case. And if so, the documentation has been over-whelming and contemporary. Time (for good or ill) has not made claims more clearly defined. Further, Clark (like Bernal and Loewen) was driven by the need to explain human endeavours, not via calendar dates, longitudes and latitudes, but experience and pathos. ‘He has passed beyond historical description of the society of every individual.’³⁸

peoples from textbooks, and only recently acknowledged they had ‘cultures,’ a point James Loewen has made skillfully.

³⁵ Maghan Keita, ‘The Politics of Criticism: *Not Out of Africa* and ‘*Black Athena*’ Revisited,’ *Journal of World History* 11.2 (2000), pp. 337-338.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

³⁷ Lefkowitz concedes there can be ‘possible different interpretations of the truth’ but only one truth (pp. 161-162). Perhaps it is her intermingling the terms ‘fact’ and ‘truth’ that is troubling, because she is not clear here on how much information, or how long a period does it take for an event or idea to be the truth. Bloodletting as a cure-all was a ‘truth’ before it was shunned, as with other ideas.

³⁸ Ryan, p. 69.

Bernal never reached the audience or stature of Clark—neither has Loewen, but powerful countering (master) narratives are legitimate contestation points. Though granted for Western countries that believe (or at least advertise) in free thinking, such positions are dangerous—they underline a seemingly unconscious hypocrisy (perhaps insecurity) in those countries. But the world needs more who do not fit neatly in boxes, if we are ever to consistently become as enlightenment as those ideals prophesized. ‘He made us see ourselves differently.’³⁹ This is best achieved by those who push and demand the best of us—‘as early as 1965 he had urged us to drop the philistine and racist comforters of the past and embrace a richer, more pluralistic view of human nature—’⁴⁰ by it being told to us directly. ‘Manning Clark preferred people with a lot of go and something to say.’⁴¹ This yearning, the attempt at being inclusive is what endeared Clark to so many.

Through his history he escaped distance and disdain, and it has earned him a special place not only in Australian historiography but also in the hearts and minds of the Australian people—particularly perhaps catholic working class people previously excluded from the national story.⁴²

And hence his legacy. ‘To forget customary notions of history as a modern science and allow it to be a form of response to one national experience of, and contribution to, civilisation—that was Manning Clark’s way. And that is how he is best read.’⁴³ Manning Clark was a Great man. Torn as he was, no one should see him in any other light. This is how to properly assess this Great Man.

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³⁹ Jill Roe, ‘Charles Manning Hope Clark’ *Labour History* 61 (1991), p. 164.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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⁴³ Ryan, p. 69.

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