

Introduction, *Walk to the Paradise Gardens*

If you drive south from Sydney down the Princes Highway, you are likely to whizz past the landscape of this novel without even noticing. Beyond the city of Wollongong/Port Kembla, and the semi-industrial sprawl of Albion Park, you find yourself hurtling down a steep hill that gives a sudden breathtaking glimpse of ocean. (And is that a cemetery? A creek? A miniature railway station, right on the beach?) But before you can get so much as a whiff of salt air, the bypass has swerved you inland and taken you beyond the coastal township of Kiama, which masquerades as Lebanon Bay in the fiction of Charmian Clift. As Combray was to Proust, so Lebanon Bay was to Clift: a landscape both real and imaginary, remembered and invented, written and rewritten through draft upon draft upon draft, so that the author often did not know the difference between what had happened there and what she had invoked.

Through most of her adult life Charmian Clift lived in self-imposed exile from her birthplace, but she would almost obsessively return to it in her fiction. On at least four occasions she wrote arrival scenes, in which the reader is invited, through the eyes of different protagonists, to see the place for the first time. These encounters go beyond descriptions of setting to become epiphanies.

In *Walk to the Paradise Gardens*, urban sophisticate Julia is reluctantly visiting her home town of Lebanon Bay in the company of her ambitious architect husband Charles, who has never been there before. As Charles brings the car to a sudden halt on the hill that overlooks the township, he exclaims not just at what he sees, but at his realisation that Julia ‘must have had it there in [her] head, all the time’.

‘How *could* you carry it about with you for so long?’ he demands. ‘All those

funny round hills bumping about under your hats... that enormous quantity of sea battering endlessly behind your eyes!’

Julia herself has so internalised the landscape that the sight of it is almost painful:

She felt that her eyes were bulging with the enormous pressure of the sea behind them. As if, literally, the neat, small, durable casing of her skull had expanded to contain all that was Lebanon Bay, perfectly preserved under its thin, radiant, dome-shaped cover of sky.

As Julia turns to her husband ‘to offer to him what she had unwittingly but so perfectly preserved’, she finds that the moment to share her secret has gone. Charles is reversing the Jaguar, heading on into the town of Lebanon Bay. It is the town that makes Julia afraid of returning: the town and its people.

Charmian Clift was born in 1923 in a rented weatherboard cottage that fronted onto the dusty gravel of ‘Sydney Road’, below the rollercoaster of Bombo Hill, at the very point where the newly-aligned Princes Highway shoots traffic south to Nowra and beyond. If the whole town of Kiama has now been bypassed, in Clift’s day it was only the little settlement on the north side that had the feeling of being left behind. ‘Obviously the end, rather than the beginning of somewhere’, the Clift family’s cottage was literally the last house in town.

Socially as well as physically, this was the wrong side of the tracks. Stunningly beautiful though the little valley was, with its backdrop of the Illawarra escarpment and the ‘enormous quantity of sea’ to the fore, this was an *industrial* landscape. The battleship-shape of Bombo promontory, which forges out into the sea at the northern end of the beach, was the site in Charmian’s time of an enormous blue metal quarry. In the mornings, the valley’s inverted bowl of misty sea air was pierced by explosions of dynamite—the sound that Charmian’s father, engineer at the quarry,

called ‘letting the pops off’. Throughout the day, steam trains loaded with gravel shunted back and forth along the single rail track that ran beside the beach. When evening came, the quarry workers trudged home in their dirty clothes to the string of ramshackle little houses that belonged to the quarry.

Over the southern headland was another world. The township of Kiama was a place of ‘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’. The administrative centre for the prosperous little dairying settlements that lay in the hinterland, Kiama was smug, snobbish and self-satisfied.

Straddling the two social classes of Kiama—the industrial proletariat of the quarry and the commercial middle class of the town—was the Clift family. As the quarry’s engineer, Syd Clift could have lived in town and mixed with his fellow professionals, but he enjoyed the company of his workmates, whom he would enthrall with his tall tales when the men ‘amalgamated’ in the evenings on the veranda of North Kiama’s single shop. Charmian’s mother Amy, on the other hand, longed for the afternoon tea parties and genteel conversation of the town’s select female social set. Frustrated in this desire, she vested all her ambitions in her children.

The one thing this ill-matched couple had in common was a love of literature. Raised on Shakespeare and Rabelais, Sterne and Cervantes, the Clift children had a huge and bawdy vocabulary, expressed in an accent that the locals—town folk and quarry folk alike—condemned as ‘English’. Along with so many other things, this underlined the fact that the Clifts were *different*.

‘I tried so hard to be like them but I didn’t know how to do it,’ Charmian’s sister Margaret once said to me. In return for what was seen as her stand-offishness,

the other children sent her to Coventry. But Charmian had it even worse. Disliked by her peers, within the family she was forced to play second fiddle to Big Sister. In Syd and Amy's eyes, it was Margaret who was the artistic one, Margaret who was going to wow the world with her talent. Charmian, they decided, would be a schoolteacher.

The world of the imagination was Charmian's escape. From as young as eight or nine, she began to develop heroic versions of herself who inhabited a place that was very like the real world around her. This was the beginning of Lebanon Bay, the mix of the real and imagined world that Clift's alter ego Julia carried under her hats.

Once Charmian became an adolescent, a more literal escape beckoned as well:

I wanted to get out into the big bad world and do—I didn't know what I wanted to do, but like most kids with any sort of creative ability I wanted it to be big, I wanted it to be enormous, I wanted to see the world, I wanted to do something—I didn't know what—better than anyone else could do.

Like many young women of her era, Charmian Clift found her opportunity in the war. Commissioned as a lieutenant, she was sent to Melbourne and given the job of editing an in-house magazine for the Ordnance Corps. Invited after her demobilization to join the staff of the *Argus* newspaper, on one of her first days at her new job she met George Johnston, a thirty-four year old journalist who had established a reputation as one of Australia's leading war correspondents, and who had also published a number of non-fiction war books. The instantaneous and highly public love affair between this older man (who had a wife and child) and the beautiful young woman caused what one colleague called 'the *scandale* of the *Argus* building'. Dismissed from their jobs, the couple headed north up the coast to Charmian Clift's parents' home in Kiama, where they had the 'honeymoon' that Johnston was later to describe as 'our own small vision of Paradise' in the Lebanon Bay section of *Clean Straw for Nothing*.

This was the beginning of a partnership that would continue through twenty three years, thirty books, and three children.

Unlike George Johnston, Charmian Clift was a very slow writer. However, she began fast, with *High Valley*, a novel written collaboratively with Johnston while she was pregnant with their first child. In 1948 this won the £2000 prize in the *Sydney Morning Herald* literary competition. This would have been enough to buy a suburban house (if George and Charmian had happened to be suburban-house-buying kind of folk), but the real value of the award was that it brought the winners to the attention of the reading public of their own country, and assured them of publication overseas. On the strength of it, they were accepted onto the list of authors represented by the prestigious British literary agent David Higham.

In early 1951, the couple—now with two children—moved to England, where Johnston had been appointed head of the London office of Associated Newspaper Services. While the move brought Charmian renewed hope that she would at last ‘find It, the Big Thing, whatever it was that she was going to recognise the moment she came across it’, London also offered the writers the chance to make a personal connection with their literary agent. In April, after a meeting with the couple, David Higham noted that Clift’s plans included a 60,000 word novel titled *Walk to the Paradise Gardens*. From this first mention, it is clear that this was to be a solo work, but throughout this year and the next Clift continued to work collaboratively with her husband, initially on a contemporary novel (*The Piping Cry*) that never found a publisher, and subsequently on *The Big Chariot*, a historical saga set in 17th-century China, which was published in America in the spring of 1953.

Already Charmian was feeling that collaboration was crippling her as a writer. Unable to keep up with the phenomenal production speed that Johnston had

developed as a journalist, her main role was to be (in her words) 'a literary hod-carrier'—doing library research in the brief hours of the day when the children were at their Montessori kindergarten, and at night acting as sounding board and editor for the pages of typescript that her husband would hammer out when he got home from his day-job.

In mid 1954, the couple (or probably George, who usually fronted business meetings alone) told their agent that they 'intended to write separately from now on'. In his notes from this conversation, David Higham added: '*A Walk To The Paradise Gardens* (70–80,000 words) by Clift ready end of Nov.' It was now more than three years since this novel had first been promised, and while the target word length had increased, not a single word had been submitted. So where was it up to?

As well as being a slow and meticulous writer, Charmian Clift was such a private one that her husband once remarked that she could be working on a book for years and he wouldn't even know what it was about. Despite the two intriguing references to the novel's title (borrowed from an orchestral piece by Delius), there is no indication of its subject matter, but a few pages of typescript from this period reveal that in her London years—a time when the author was feeling confined by the weather and depressed by the bleakness of post-war England—she sought escape by writing about her wild, free, sunny heartland. One of these fragments of text is narrated in the first person by a character who has returned to the scene of her childhood and sees a strange old woman called Selina (who would make her way into the finished version of *Walk to the Paradise Gardens*). And in a note to another draft, the author tells herself:

If you can do this with a sort of limpid quality—very much al fresco—the smell of the sea in it, and the heat of the sun, and the feel of wet sand squelching between your toes, and the beauty and darkness of

adolescence.

The smell of the sea!

By the time the promised delivery-date of November 1954 arrived, Charmian and George had exchanged London, and with it the security of George's well-paid job, for a precarious existence as full-time writers on the remote and poverty-stricken Greek island of Kalymnos. While Johnston immediately launched into a novel about the sponge divers who were the island's lifeblood, Clift began working alone on what would now be called a memoir about the family's life on the island. Back in a landscape that shared the wild beauty of her birthplace, the author for the first time found her voice and the 'sort of limpid quality' for which she had been striving unsuccessfully while she was in London.

With the two Kalymnos books essentially finished by mid-1955, the couple moved to the more civilised island of Hydra, where Charmian—amidst the distractions of buying a house, having a baby, and working on some editorial revisions to *Mermaid Singing*—immediately began gathering material for its sequel. Written month by month as Charmian got to know her exotic new neighbourhood, the typescript of *Peel Me a Lotus* almost seemed to write itself. It was sent off in May 1957.

What next?

Years later, in an interview for *The Australian*, Clift observed that she wrote the two so-called travel books 'and then I thought it was time for THE novel'.

Written in capitals by the journalist who did the interview, the emphasis given to this definite article expresses the sense of importance the author had given to this venture. 'THE novel' was of course the thing she had been trying to write, and failing

to write, for so long. Although finally when she got it done she would tell David Higham that it was ‘the same old [novel] I have been promising you for years and still with the same old title’, the version of *Walk to the Paradise Gardens* on which Clift would embark at this time would have a new plot and new characters. It was still firmly based, however, in the microcosm of Lebanon Bay that the author had been inventing since the days when she was a stormy adolescent scribbling in the sand dunes. More than setting or background, this place is the prime mover that drives the novel. In the concluding passage, as Julia wonders if she had ‘invoked’ what had happened, she reflects that ‘it had been a feel in the grass, a smell in the air, and that rock rising, steeped in anticipation’. This rock was Selina’s rock, part of the London draft of the novel.

Started at a time of high confidence, *Walk to the Paradise Gardens* was written over two and a half years of economic hardship and faltering professional confidence. *Peel Me a Lotus*—sent off with such expectation in mid 1957—would take eighteen months to find a publisher in Britain, and by early 1959 it had been declined by ten publishers in the United States. This setback, and the financial failures of Johnston’s current books, combined with crippling tax bills from three countries, caused continual money problems for the couple, who nevertheless generously shouted drinks and meals for the indigent artists and would-be-artists who seemed to arrive by the job-lot with every ferry from nearby Athens.

These summer lotus-eaters (as Clift typified them in her second travel book) caused various strains to the relationship between Charmian and George. Portrayed in devastating (and not very accurate) detail in Johnston’s fiction, these difficulties would have a much more gentle echo in *Walk to the Paradise Gardens*, where Julia makes the silent cry to her husband, ‘Let us love each other! Before it’s too late!’

The summer of 1958 was a particularly bad one. As Charmian—who had put up with George’s flings with female members of his office staff when she was a London wife—embarked on a frivolous affair, George’s jealousy reached high point. Meanwhile his tuberculosis, contracted during the war but still undiagnosed, was making him feel sick and frightened. In the claustrophobic and incestuous world of Hydra’s foreign colony, people who unashamedly sponged on the Johnstons’ generosity were thrilled by the spectacle of their public and alcohol-fuelled rows, and did not see the hours of labour at the typewriter that both writers did between dawn and the midday drinking session on the waterfront.

No matter what happened over summer, winter was a time when Charmian and George worked hard, and in harmony. In early January 1959, Johnston informed David Higham that ‘Charmian’s final polishing of *Walk to the Paradise Gardens* should take another week or so. I like it as a novel very much.’

For Clift, a week or so of polishing meant months. So it was actually late April when at last she sent the typescript of THE novel to her American agent, who was still struggling to sell *Lotus*. A month later, he could barely contain his excitement: ‘The jinx seems to have broken first crack out of the box. I am happy to tell you that Harpers are very enthusiastic about *Walk to the Paradise Gardens*.’

So committed were they to the book and its author that they offered an advance of US\$1500 and a good royalty rate, and they wanted an option on Clift’s next book. She was, she said in a hasty note to her British agent, ‘of course quite immoderately happy’. The joy was compounded in July when David Higham wrote to say that a British publisher as well had made an offer for the book. Writing back to accept the terms, Clift told him that:

I have all sorts of writing plans and shall probably go on producing a novel a year for many many years to come. I think *Lotus* was better than *Mermaid*,

and *Paradise Gardens* better than *Lotus*, and I know the next one, *Honour's Mimic*, is going to be better than *Paradise Gardens*. I have, you see, enough confidence in myself at least.

This was Charmian whistling in the wind. But at least, for the moment, she had done THE novel!

Any child who suffers rejection by her peers harbours a dream that one day she will do something that will really *show* them. While *Walk to the Paradise Gardens* was not written in a spirit of revenge, the portrait of the social mores of 'Lebanon Bay' was so true to life that, when the book came out in 1960, Kiama residents were outraged. This anger sparked such a renewal of hostility towards Charmian Clift that even in the 1980s, when I first began going to the town and asking questions about her family, it was easy for me to see why the fictional Julia had been so reluctant to return.

But if Clift presented the social landscape of an Australian country town in all its petty snobbery and pretentiousness, her portrayal of the physical landscape shows the love she felt for this place that she once described as 'the centre of the world'.

Loved and loathed, part heaven and part hell...

Julia's husband Charles, as he enters the Paradise Gardens, quotes Dante—'All hope abandon ye...' And throughout the book, images of Paradise and the Inferno are juxtaposed, as the light and colours switch back and forth from green to red like the flickering celluloid disc at the dance at the Oddfellows Hall. These polarities are further reinforced by changes of temperature—the cool of the sea, the heat of the sun—and as the story metaphorically warms up, bushfires ring the

township and the wind whips a sand-spray ‘as hot as the breath of inferno’.

Yet if the novel’s symbolic landscape pays tribute to Dante, its action reads at times like a tragic rendering of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. (Just read about Julia and the hairy young man in the blue nylon shirt, and you’ll know how Titania must have felt on the morning after her escapade with Bottom.) While Clift’s childhood grounding in Shakespeare is evident, a further influence was surely that of classical Greek drama. Here, as in a Greek tragedy, the characters seem to have no alternative but to act as they do, and their actions form a kind of ritual that leads to a predestined disaster. (‘Such classical echoes sounded among the chromium and glass and black-beaded cocktail dresses in the Bay Hotel that summer.’)

These themes are timeless. Whatever melodramatic element the book’s denouement may have, its feminist politics have not dated in the sixty-plus years since it was written. Indeed, at a time when women are increasingly aware of incipient forms of control and abuse that can occur within relationships, the tactics adopted by the husbands of Meg and Julia take on a chilling immediacy. And Julia’s cry of ‘Where am I?’ as she tries to ‘break through out of the public image of Charles Cant’s wife’ could still be echoed by many women.

Charmian Clift would indeed go on to write *Honour’s Mimic* as she had told David Higham she would do, but the plan of a novel a year — always bound to be an ambitious one for this writer — did not come off. Instead, after her return to Australia in 1964, Clift found her true vocation as the writer of short essays that appeared on a weekly basis in the homely surrounds of the Women’s pages of a daily newspaper.

Described by critic Peter Craven as having ‘more lightning and quicksilver, more brilliance and more skill of execution than any Australian writing other than the

great novels of Patrick White and Christina Stead', these seemingly ephemeral 'pieces' would assure the author the kind of place in Australian literature that she was seeking with her novels.

Nadia Wheatley, 2021