Author Note to
The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift

'This story is fiction. The characters do not exist, nor did the incidents occur, excepting in my imagination'. Thus Charmian Clift, in the Author's Note for her novel *Honour's Mimic,* distanced herself from any obligation to defend the truth of her tale. Her husband George Johnston, in the note to his autobiographical novel *My Brother Jack,* took a somewhat different stance by quoting the French writer André Gide: 'Fiction there is — and history. Certain critics of no little discernment have considered that fiction is history which *might* have taken place, and history fiction which *has* taken place'. In regard to the work at hand, it would be amusing to follow Clift's line that 'This story is fiction', but maybe more true to paraphrase Gide: in the case of Charmian Clift and George Johnston, biography is 'fiction which *has* taken place'.

Where, then, lies the truth?

In this book I try to keep myself off the page. I never met Charmian Clift or George Johnston, and I was not present during any of the incidents that take place in this account. Everything I know comes from interviews; from written texts ranging from letters to fiction (published and unpublished) to secondary sources; and — I have to admit it — from my imagination. Like any historian, I am sometimes forced to make deductions in order to fill in the spaces that lie between the available sources. As obviously all the opinion in this book is mine, it seemed unnecessary to state this at every point. Of course, this technique of the invisible narrator is an artifice: the writer is still, in fact, present on every page. However, as I am not overtly there for the reader to interrogate, it seems only fair that I start by declaring my hand, in regard both to my relationship with the subject of this book, and to my historiographical approach. This is particularly the case because, while my viewpoint on the events is mainly that of an outsider, at times I had, willy-nilly, a bit of an inside view. To explain this, I have to

begin with something of my own story.

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In my second year at Sydney University, in 1967, I found myself in a weekly English Honours seminar in which — among the fifteen or twenty other students — there was a very tall and very thin young man with long dark hair and long white hands. He always wore black skivvies and black trousers and he sat beneath the arched Gothic window of the seminar room and incessantly smoked black Sobranies. It seemed as if the tutor spent the whole session eliciting this particular student's opinions on the required reading for the week, and this young man would answer in a light, precise voice, and these answers would be pedantically erudite, and once he gave them, none of the other students would ever dare disagree. At the end of each seminar, as I was leaving, I would hear the tutor talking to this young man about some latest thing that his parents had written, or perhaps some thing which had been written about his parents.

I could not help but be aware that this student's father had published a highly acclaimed novel called *My Brother Jack,* which I hadn't got around to reading. I'd somehow also missed the television serial of the same name, which had gone to air on Saturday nights towards the end of 1965. Although I didn't know that this student's mother had written the script for the TV show, I did know that she wrote a weekly column in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. So infuriated was I, however, by something about the young man that I did not read his mother's column. If I wouldn't read things *by* these writers, I also wasn't going to read *about* them; and so, over the next few years, although I was generally aware of the lives and then the deaths of Charmian Clift and George Johnston, I did my best to avoid information about this family. Somehow, the whole media thing really annoyed me; it was (I realise now) the Clift/Johnston myth that I loathed.

Over these years, the student himself abandoned university, and became initially

a journalist and later a scrounging freelancer, in order to support his habit of writing poetry. Meanwhile I also escaped the English Department, and majored in Australian history. By the winter of 1972, I was enrolled in a masters degree when my circle of pub friends came to include a number of chess players, and through this I found myself sometimes sitting at the same table as Martin Johnston. I guess it helped that he was always totally absorbed in moving pieces around a board, for he didn't seem nearly as pretentious as the young man from the English Honours seminars. It probably also helped that he had changed from Sobranies to Alpine, although he still marked his individuality by having a dash of cloves in his beer. And as I was on a Commonwealth postgraduate scholarship and he was totally broke, I sometimes bought him a beer (with a dash of cloves), and he always thanked me in a way that was almost excessively polite. By the time summer came, we were living together.

Of course, something else happened in Australia in 1972, something even more momentous than a love affair. I mean, of course, the election of the Labor Government, which put an end to the conservative rule which seemed to have held the nation in thrall for two decades. Indeed, looking now at this story from the outside, and with the benefit of hindsight, I find a curious symmetry to the fact that it was in this year that marked the end of a political era that I came to know Martin and (by repute) his parents, for it was in direct response to the beginning of the Menzies period that Charmian Clift and George Johnston had left Australia and begun their expatriate life.

More immediately, for Martin, the election of the Whitlam Government offered the possibility of a year's reprieve from the grinding poverty and drudgery of a freelance writer's life. In 1973 the Literature Board of the Australia Council received increased funding, and a greatly enlarged program of grants was advertised. As just about everyone who had ever published a poem was going to apply, Martin decided that he would have a greater chance of success if he put himself forward in a different genre. Turning to the subject matter which was closest at hand, he volunteered to write a kind

of memoir of his parents. I remember him talking about Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* as the sort of literary model which he had in mind. That is, his work would be a personal view from inside the family circle. At the time, I did not see as significant the fact that he chose a model which examines the relationship between two generations of men. This was quickly irrelevant, anyway, for when Martin actually received what seemed like the extraordinary sum of $5000, he embarked upon an experimental novel entitled *Cicada Gambit.*

During these early years of living with Martin, I read most of the books that Charmian Clift and George Johnston had published, and naturally I absorbed bits and pieces of information about Martin's parents. In conversation, Martin would frequently refer to something which 'Mum always said' or which 'Dad used to say', and I developed a fairly strong idea of what his parents had believed about life, literature, politics, and so on. At the same time, there were little details such as the fact that 'Dad used to make a really good egg and bacon pie' or 'When my mother was a little girl, she used to starbake on the beach at night, in the belief that she would turn silver'. Meanwhile, there were other contributors to my impression of Martin's family life, because we would also sometimes see people who had been friends of his parents, as well as occasionally having a meal with his sister Shane or his brother Jason. All of this built up a picture, in the same way that I no doubt created a picture for Martin of my dead mother and my long-absent father. But we didn't ever sit down and consciously talk about our parents: we were young, and much more interested in ourselves.

Meanwhile, Martin's novel was rejected, my postgraduate work in history was completed, and life went on. As the Greek Junta fell in 1974 and the Whitlam Government suffered a coup in 1975, Martin and I switched countries. At the same time, I switched to writing fiction. During the next two and a half years, while we lived in Greece, I sometimes met former friends and acquaintances of the Johnstons, such as George's great friend Grace Edwards, and other people who had been part of the Hydra

scene. Apart from Grace, however, Martin usually tried to avoid these contacts and, in this whole Greek sojourn, we spent only one night on Hydra.

Perhaps the most significant thing that I learned about Charmian Clift and George Johnston, through Martin, was their commitment to writing on a regular basis. In this period, Martin would sit at the typewriter for up to eight hours a day, six days a week, for ten months of the year. Stuck in a village or small town with no one to talk to in English apart from Martin himself — what could I do but follow his example, which he in turn had acquired from his parents? Although the regular practice of writing every day — come hell or high hangover — was a great legacy which Martin bequeathed to me, as I became more and more committed to my own writing, and as the prospect of returning to Australia loomed in 1978, I found myself wondering whether there was room in a relationship for two writers. If Martin were to tell the story of why our partnership ended, it would no doubt be different. However, I know that he would agree that the friendship, and in particular our interest in talking to each other about books and writing, remained.

In 1979, when we were back in Sydney but no longer living together, Martin again received Literature Board support to research a biography of his parents. This particular grant funded travel to Greece, where Martin talked to Grace Edwards and other associates of his parents, and even spent a couple of nights on Hydra, staying in a hotel which had once been a house where a family friend had hung himself. A sonnet entitled 'Biography', written at this time, reveals something of Martin's distaste for the project he had undertaken:

> Back past the sold houses in the lost domains
> down in the midden-humus
> glows the rotting trelliswork of 'family',
> odd slug-coloured tubers wince at the touch
> with feigned unanthropomorphic shyness,

naked pink tendrils explore holes.

By the time Martin returned to Australia in March 1980, he was very apprehensive about the personal pain which would be involved in writing about his parents. However, he still felt himself to be committed to the project. One Literature Board grant could be shrugged aside; it was harder to ignore two.

Meanwhile, I had completed a novel, which nobody seemed to want to publish. Although I had received some funding for a film script, I had been living on the dole for most of the previous eighteen months and I was wondering if I would ever survive as a writer of fiction. That was my problem, the day that Martin arrived for lunch and started talking about the problems he was having, writing a biography of his parents. As we discussed his situation, it emerged that he felt that his particular area of difficulty was in dealing with the half of the story which would be about Charmian Clift. This was partly because of unresolved pain and confusion connected with his mother's death. However, Martin also talked about the fact that, as a man, he did not feel that he would be able to enter imaginatively into the experience of a woman, in the way which would be necessary in order to write her biography. On top of that, he complained, the thing which he hated about the biography was all the time that he would have to spend in libraries. This was made particularly difficult by the fact that you couldn't smoke in libraries, and Martin couldn't concentrate without a cigarette.

At what stage of that afternoon did we get the crazy notion that we could both solve our work problems by combining them? All I know is that, by the time he left, we had a piece of paper on which we had a plan for a collaborative biography of Charmian Clift and George Johnston

The idea was, we would together write a study of two writers who were collaborators. According to our one-page outline, Martin would be responsible for the chapters dealing with Johnston, and I would be responsible for the chapters dealing with Clift. While we proposed to share our work back and forth as we wrote, the plan was

that there would be two distinct voices — one male and one female — running through the text, as we respectively discussed the male and female subjects. There were also to be 'interludes' in which our two voices would discuss the ideas which could not be parcelled off into the two separate areas.

It is clear from this that the text was to approach Clift and Johnston primarily as writers, and through their written work. In particular, it was the idea of collaboration in which we were most interested. We planned to focus our study on the writing partnership, particularly the cross-fertilisation and sharing of ideas from one writer to another. In a situation where the two collaborators were the kind of writers who draw directly from personal experience and autobiographical material, any study of the literary partnership would naturally raise questions about the use of material, the ownership of joint experience, and the way the mind plays an editorial role in the selecting and shaping of memory. This in turn raised issues to do with the nature of fiction, and the whole process of the literary imagination.

As far as Martin was concerned, the immediate benefit which he would get from our collaboration would be that I would do most of the research. Although I also disliked working in libraries, I was fairly accustomed to spending weeks wading through newspaper files, making slabs of notes, organising material, keeping footnotes and sources in order. I also had experience in preparing and conducting oral history interviews and transcribing audio-tapes. (Martin's interviews so far had been conducted without tape recorder or even notepad.)

For me, the project seemed a way that I could maybe use some of my training and experience. While I hadn't really thought much about the historiography of biography, I imagined that it was positioned somewhere between history and fiction. That is, I thought it would require the analytical approach of a historian, combined with a novelist's ability to enter into the mind of a character. Naively, I thought that being a bit of a historian and a bit of a fiction writer might suit me for this hybrid genre.

Fairly soon after we agreed on the deal I went to Canberra and began some preliminary research in the National Library, where the papers of Charmian Clift and George Johnston are stored. In July of that year, Martin got a job subtitling Greek movies for the fledgling Special Broadcasting Service. I also had other things happening in my life, including at last the acceptance of my first novel. There was no real urgency about the biography, but I kept sporadically doing research.

I guess it was in 1982 that Martin told me that he had been approached by an academic who wanted to do a PhD about George Johnston's writing. A bit later, Martin told me that this academic's thesis was now to be a biography, intended for publication. There wasn't room in the market for two books on George Johnston, Martin declared, and so he was pulling out of his half of our project. However, he insisted that he had told Garry Kinnane that I was 'doing' the Clift half of the story

I didn't want to write a biography, under those terms. I couldn't see how the material could be divided into a 'Johnston' book and a 'Clift' book. It wasn't fair on Garry Kinnane, or on me, or on Charmian Clift, or on George Johnston. I told Martin that I wanted to abandon the work. By now I was living in Melbourne, and planning to move to a remote area of the Victorian countryside. My first book was published. I had finished my second novel, and was at work on my third. Why would I want to write a biography?

Martin was adamant, however, that I should write a book about his mother. Over the next few years, every time I tried to winkle out of it, he would say, *'Oh, but Nard...*' And I would give in.

So, in a half-hearted fashion, I started to build up my research material, both from interviews and from primary and secondary written sources, in between doing what I wanted to do — which was to write fiction. Meanwhile Martin withdrew so completely from the project that he would only consent twice to be interviewed by me — once at the ABC studios, for a radio program which I did in collaboration with Garry

Kinnane, and once at dinner in a restaurant, on condition that I didn't have a tape recorder.

I say this in order to make it clear that, while my first impressions of the domestic and professional lives of Charmian Clift and George Johnston had been unconsciously gleaned during the seven years when Martin and I were living together, Martin had no hand in the development of this text, and indeed he did not read any of the work-in-progress. I should also say that there were no guidelines for the project. Just as Martin had stressed in his Literature Board application in 1979 that his solo work would neither be hagiographic nor 'Official/Authorised', Martin simply said that he didn't want me to write a hagiography. There was no notion that my work would have some sort of seal of family authorisation or approval. As a historian, I could not have agreed to work under any conditions about content or interpretation.

At the same time, although I knew Charmian and George's younger son, Jason, and saw him quite often through all these years, I believed that he had no interest in what I would write. And as I also mistakenly thought that he, like Martin, did not want to talk about his family, I did not ask for his version of events until I had completed a draft of the whole story. I wish that I had consulted him earlier. However, my involvement in this project has often caused me to feel as if I were walking on eggshells.

Overall, it sometimes seemed if I had the worst of both worlds, in regard to being both inside and outside the circle of family and friendship. While I felt I was too far 'in' to be told some things, I was too far 'out' to be told other things. There were quite a few people whom I knew socially, through the Johnston connection, who did not wish to be formally interviewed, but who nevertheless talked to me about Charmian and George. The result of this was that I sometimes ended up with information which I could not include. Particularly problematic was an affectionate relationship which developed with Charmian's sister, Margaret Backhouse (whom I had not known when I was living with

Martin). After a while I started to visit her in order to see *her*, and not to talk about her sister.

Meanwhile, there was the whole business of deciding what sort of historiographical approach I would take. Even with Martin out of the project, my main interest was still with Clift as a writer. As Clift happened to be a female writer, I was also interested in how her gender affected her career. This would have come into play no matter what occupation her husband had followed. But as her partner was a male writer, his career provided a convenient point of comparison.

To this degree, the theoretical framework of my study could be categorised as feminist. And after all, the politics of feminism were bound up in the reason that Martin wanted me to take part in the project in the first place. As well as this, it seemed to me that a feminist approach was relevant to this subject, whose writing and life had foreshadowed some of the preoccupations of second wave feminism which were starting to float around at the time of her death.

This brings me to my next area of concern. Essentially, I am a social historian before I am a biographer. I was interested in writing about a life which raised certain social and political issues of the watershed period from the 1920s to the 1960s. Of course, Charmian Clift was not a 'typical' woman of her time. But that is the point. By seeing how and why this particular square peg did not fit into the round hole which society had fashioned for her, we can gain some insight into the lives and expectations of other women and wives and mothers who seemed to fit more neatly into their economic, domestic and social roles, and yet who instantly identified with the attitudes expressed in Clift's newspaper column.

This brings me to the final historiographic matter which needs to be raised. As well as avoiding the personal pronoun, I choose to present the material here as a chronological narrative. It is true that fracturing and fragmenting a biographical narrative is a way of highlighting interesting juxtapositions. However, such a method

can tend to increase the problem of distortion which is already inherent in the act of writing — and reading — biography.

In her novel *According to Mark*, the British author Penelope Lively has her biographer hero Mark realise that he 'contemplates [his subject] all the time with the wisdom of foresight'. That is, as Mark researches his subject's early life, he does it in the light of knowledge which his subject did not have, about how the life would turn out, and even end. While this 'wisdom of foresight' means that the biographer has a tendency to shape the material so that it seems to reveal its significance in terms of subsequent events, it is also the case that the reader usually approaches the story of the subject's life with a similar pre-existing knowledge. It is, after all, part of the nature of reading a biography that, when we start, we tend to know the broad details of the subject's life, in a way we do not know the plot of a novel before we read it. Thus we read the life knowing what the subject did not know: which was how the tale would end.

This is particularly problematic if, as in Charmian Clift's case, the story ends in suicide. While, by its taboo nature, this form of death seems to create a particular type of curiosity, many people seem so determined to find a 'cause' for it that anything — or everything — in the life is seen as leading to the death. If I had any single historiographic aim, it was to try to present the life as Charmian herself lived it, not knowing what the next day would bring. In other words, I wanted to *not* write a life which seemed to lead inevitably to a death.

There was also another reason why an old-fashioned combination of chronological method and third-person narrator seemed to me the right one for the book. This was because, in various tellings of the story of Charmian Clift, there had already been a considerable blurring of the boundaries between fact, fiction and myth. The confusion in people's perceptions of Clift's life had been furthered by the deliberate fragmentation and rearrangement of chronology which had occurred in George Johnston's second autobiographical novel, *Clean Straw for Nothing.* In response to this,

I felt that the sober accumulation of information — alleviated by occasional dashes of imagination — was the only way to separate the life from the legend. And yet, while I have tried to be factual, this study does not pretend to be the truth, or indeed the final word.

Nadia Wheatley, 2001