



Charmian Clift, seated, with husband, fellow author George Johnston, and Kalymnian woman Sevasti Taktikou, who explained local women's business to Clift. Top right: while Clift had led a fashionable life in London in the early 1950s, she was keen to move her young family to the Greek island.



IT'S NOVEMBER 1954. The scene is a party in a London flat that's still swanky despite the fact it's recently been stripped of its usual books and paintings. The assembled guests – most of them Australian – include Paul Brickhill (former fighter pilot and author of *The Great Escape*), actor Peter Finch (yes, *the* Peter Finch), industrial designer Gordon Andrews, theatre designer Loudon Sainthill, artist Cedric Flower, writer Pat Flower and journalists Harry Kippax, Anthony Whitlock, Hazel Tulley and Nigel Palethorpe, among others. They've assembled to say goodbye to two fellow Australians, Charmian Clift and George Johnston, who've bravely – most think crazily – decided to jettison their secure and fashionable life in London and set off with their two young children to live on a remote Greek island.

"What's it called again?" the guests ask each other. "Kalymnos? Who's ever heard of Kalymnos?" Someone murmurs that it's in the Dodecanese, within spitting distance of Turkey; not fashionable at all.

Although the couple has previously published two collaboratively written novels, their income has derived from Johnston's highly paid job as head of the London office of an Australian newspaper corporation. Now they're going to try their luck as full-time writers.

For readers who know something of these authors' subsequent careers, it may be difficult to grasp just what a gamble they're taking. But this is 10 years before George Johnston's classic Australian novel *My Brother Jack* will win the Miles Franklin Award, and 10 years before Charmian Clift will become a household name, thanks to the popularity of her weekly column in the women's pages of *The Sydney Morning Herald* and Melbourne's then *Herald*.

The couple's decision to relocate to Kalymnos has been based on a single throw of the dice. Two months earlier, Australian radio journalist Wilfrid Thomas played them a recording of a program he had made for the BBC about an innovative proposal by the Australian government to import Kalyrnian sponge divers to Darwin, to dive for pearls. Believing there's subject matter for a novel in that, the authors have sold their belongings to subsidise a year of writing time in Greece.

The farewell party is going gangbusters when Wilfrid Thomas arrives from the BBC studios, looking agitated. He's just had a call from Canberra: the Kalyrnian immigration scheme has been called off.

An awkward silence falls upon the gathering. No doubt some of the guests think the couple has made a lucky escape. Johnston's colleagues wonder if he'll try to claw back his resignation. Clift has to act fast to prevent her more cautious husband from abandoning the plan. Her response, remembered by everyone at that party, has rightly become part of the Clift and Johnston legend.

"We can't back out now, darling," she declares in her highly-charged, contralto voice. "I've already cancelled the order for the winter coal."

A GREEK ODYSSEY

When Charmian Clift swapped a swanky London lifestyle to live on the island of Kalymnos, she discovered a tiny community with a surprising culture. Decades later, at the launch of a Greek translation of the book Clift wrote there, her biographer finds those intriguing traditions – and Aussie links – are still going strong.

BY *Nadia Wheatley*

THREE WEEKS later, on a cold and stormy December day, the couple arrive on Kalymnos and move into what Clift will call “a 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”. In fact, the family’s new home comprises four rented rooms – two of them uninhabitable – above a sponge merchant’s warehouse. There’s no furniture or bedding, and the only running water (whether for drinking, washing or flushing the noisome toilet) is the rain pouring through the leaking roof. While seven-year-old Martin pines for peanut butter, and Shane, aged five, misses her little friends at the Montessori kindergarten, the locals, assuming Clift and Johnston are some sort of immigration committee, besiege the newcomers with requests for residence permits for Australia.

“How to say that we were looking for a mermaid?” Clift writes in her journal. This metaphorical mermaid, borrowed from T.S. Eliot’s poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, stands for the spiritual element she’d felt to be missing from the family’s privileged life in London. “How to explain that we were civilisation sick, asphalt and television sick, that we had lost our beginnings and felt a sort of hollow that we had not been able to fill up with material success. We had come to Kalymnos to seek a source, or a wonder, or a sign, to be reassured in our humanity.”

Within weeks, Clift’s island-journal began to develop into her first solo book. Completed by the end of the coming summer on Kalymnos, *Mermaid Singing* is the first expression of the author’s unique lyric voice. As a travel book, it was also unique. Forty years later, American writer Frances Mayes would hit the bestseller lists with her memoir *Under the Tuscan Sun*, but in the mid-1950s, people did not want to read about life in a foreign country as seen from a woman’s point of view. Published in the US in 1956 and in England two years later, *Mermaid Singing* got rave reviews, but sales were so low that it soon went out of print. It would not even be published in Australia until 1970 – a year after the author’s death.

Now, as Charmian Clift is being discovered by a new generation of readers drawn to her feminism as much as to her prose style, the book has been newly published in Britain and Australia. Most wondrous of all, it has just been translated into Greek. It is this translation that brings me to Kalymnos.

AS CHARMIAN Clift’s biographer, I’ve been invited by the island’s municipal tourism officer to say a few words at the launch of *To Tragoudi tis Gorgonas* (literally *The Song of the Mermaid*). My personal quest, however, is to see if I can find traces of the Kalymnos Clift knew – and also of the Greece I myself once knew.

Eighteen years after Clift arrived on Kalymnos, but a decade before I began work on her biography, I fell in love with her elder son, Martin. By then in his mid-20s, he was one of Australia’s up-and-coming poets. Although he and his family had returned to Sydney in 1964, he still dreamed in Greek. (I knew this because I’d hear him talking in his sleep.) Along with many other Greek exiles, Martin would not go back to Greece while the right-wing Junta, which had seized power in 1967, was in control. But when that regime fell in 1974, and a year later the Whitlam government was dismissed, Martin and I exchanged Australia for Greece. We did not return home until late 1978.

I was not prepared for this combination of Australian mateship and emotional intelligence.



Above: the port town of Pothia, Kalymnos. In the past, the region’s sponge diving work meant a large proportion of the island’s men were away for up to nine months of the year. Today, many Kalymnian men still travel beyond the island for work.

Over those three years in Greece, we lived very happily, subsisting at about the same level that Martin’s parents had done on Kalymnos. However, a subsequent visit, in April 2003, left me preferring my remembered Greece to the unfamiliar country that was grappling with the twin pressures of the second Iraq War and the lead-up to the Athens Olympics. What will I find in 2022?

MY ARRIVAL on Kalymnos is in summer: warm enough for swimming, but mercifully outside the high tourist season. Like Clift, I make the last stage of the journey from the neighbouring island of Kos, but this morning the sea is tame and the *caïque* that she travelled on has been replaced by a catamaran. Alas, this proves to be

no guarantee of safety.

As the loudspeaker blares out my destination with increasing urgency, I’m blocked in my seat by a large male backpacker who is obviously travelling on to the next island and who (eyes glued to his phone screen; ears plugged into Bluetooth) will not move so much as a millimetre to let me out.

“Excuse me, could I please ...?”

Struggling past his huge protruding knees, I feel one of my own kneecaps make a 90-degree twist in its socket. Do I actually hear it crunch, or is that the sound

of my scream as I collapse with an injury that a later MRI scan will reveal to be a full tear of the anterior cruciate ligament? This is the sort of thing that causes a footballer to leave the field on a stretcher but somehow, using my wheeled suitcase like a rollator, I manage to trundle my way down the boat ramp and onto the quay ... where the municipal tourism officer, Giorgos Hatzismalis, is waiting.

“We better get you to a physiotherapist,” he says as he takes in the difficulty I’m having. I would not have expected there to be such a person on the island, but before I can say anything, he adds, “Fortunately, my brother is a physiotherapist.”

Over recent weeks, Hatzismalis and I have exchanged emails and phone calls – enough for me to know that he was born in Darwin in 1964, so was 10 years old when he and his mother and three younger siblings flew back to Kalymnos two days after Cyclone Tracy – but I was not prepared for his particular combination of Australian mateship and a kind of emotional intelligence that I will come to feel is a quality of Kalymnian men. My first experience of this comes now, as he delicately assists me onto the back of his moped; aged 73, and with one leg completely immobilised, I’m not the most nimble of passengers.

“See there – the yellow house above the shop? That’s the one we believe is where Charmian stayed,” Hatzismalis shouts over his shoulder as we whizz along the waterfront. “She said it had four windows, and look, there are four windows ...”

I’m not up to counting windows, and barely register the building before we turn into a labyrinth of narrow alleyways (built to accommodate donkeys and suitable only

for their motorised equivalent) that take us to the consulting rooms of his brother, John.

“Pagos!” Ice! John does not want to touch the knee until the swelling subsides. I murmur that I have travel insurance and he must give me an invoice.

“Of course not!” Giorgos Hatzismalis interjects. “You are on Kalymnos now.”

This is the first indication I have that Clift’s Kalymnos is still here. But also – and even more movingly for me – the kindness I’m already finding on the island makes me think of the Greece I knew in the 1970s when I lived here with Martin.

STILL SOMEWHAT jet-lagged after my flight from Australia, I wake to the clanging of the 7am bell from the Byzantine-style church of Aghia Triada (Holy Trinity) that’s perched on the bare and rocky hillside above my hotel room. Using a broom for support, I get to the pool to do some gentle exercises with my knee, but it seems little improved from yesterday.

A couple of hours later, Hatzismalis arrives on the moped to transport me to a waterfront cafe adjacent to “Charmian’s house”. The faded yellow facade of the building’s upper storey does have four windows, but a tree conceals the little balcony that Clift described as her “observation post”. From here, she could see “all of Kalymnos” passing each day “for review”: “*Captains and divers, sponge buyers and sponge sellers, deck hands and fishermen, strolling to the coffee houses and tavernas ...; their busy wives, swooping across the plateia with water pitchers, market baskets, strings of fish, flat boards stacked with newly baked bread ...; barefooted children playing endless complicated games with stones and sticks and little piles of almonds ...*”

As we wait to go to a second physiotherapy session, Hatzismalis rings a friend, Manolis Psarras, who arrives from his nearby printing business. Born in “Sythney”



Left: the yellow house where Clift and Johnston lived in 1955. Below: Georgia Tsirigoti, a physics teacher on Kalymnos, says that today on the island, just as in her grandmother Sevasti Taktikou's day, "the women are the boss of the house."



in 1964, Psarras returned to Kalymnos when he was four but his identity as an Australian is so strong that by his own choice he has only an Australian passport. A passionate book collector, especially of books about his island, he tells me he's recently read *The Song of the Mermaid*.

As the two men talk to each other in Greek about the book, I'm aware that there is some sort of undercurrent to the conversation; after a bit of back and forth it emerges that they're somewhat critical of Clift's description of the power of women in Kalymnian society. This is a key element of *Mermaid Singing*: as a forward-thinking woman of her generation, Clift was familiar with Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking *The Second Sex*, in which the French philosopher describes how women throughout history have been relegated to a subordinate or secondary status. Although agreeing overall with this proposition, in *Mermaid Singing*, Clift daringly suggests that, in the supposedly primitive society of Kalymnos, the First Sex is female.

Taking from Robert Graves' 1955 book, *The Greek Myths*, the idea that the ancient female cult of the Triple Goddess had remained embedded within the subsequent patriarchal Olympian religion (Zeus and all that crew), Clift applied this idea to contemporary Kalymnian society: "In the churches the dark, hard God of Byzantium thunders his creed of male supremacy. In the tavernas and coffee houses and shipyards ... it is substantiated. But in the Kalymnian houses the Triple Goddess lurks still upon the hearth and the bed shelf, smiling lewdly among the icons."

I've sometimes suspected that in *Mermaid Singing*, Clift romanticised the extent of women's power on Kalymnos. So when Hatzismalis and Psarras begin to voice their reservations about her analysis, that is what I expect them to say. To my astonishment, however, these two Kalymnian men inform me that Clift *understated* the power of Kalymnian women.

"We are a matriarchal community," Hatzismalis proudly tells me. "It is the mother, not the husband, who has the power in the family here." He goes on to explain that, "The reason is, traditionally, the men are away nine months of the year, with the sponge boats. So the ladies of this island have to have control of the house and the family." There's only the briefest of pauses before he concludes, "Still it is so today."

These days only a handful of boats make the annual trip to the sponge fields, and modern diving equipment has ended the terrible toll the industry used to take upon the island's husbands and fathers, but Kalymnian

men are still seafarers, with many working in the merchant navy. Others lead a fly-in-fly-out existence between jobs in Australia and their homes and families on the island.

I've now been sitting chatting with my two companions for over an hour, so I venture to ask: "Are you Kalymnian men happy with the fact that the women here have the power?"

Hatzismalis laughs uproariously. "Why not?" After translating my question to Psarras, he repeats: "Why not?" Psarras joins the laughter. "We Kalymnian men are very happy."

I feel there's something going on that I, as a mere second-wave feminist, do not get. Obviously I need a woman's viewpoint on all this.

"SEVASTI, YOU might say, simply happened," Clift wrote. "In no sense did we ever employ her. It was rather that, by a process of time, we acquired her."

On the morning in December 1954, when Clift began housekeeping on the island, three fat women began "quarrelling vociferously in the kitchen" for the right to earn a few drachmas by working for her; meanwhile, in the flooded spare room, a thin woman silently started cleaning up the mess. "She has possessed us ever since," the author observed. As well as being "the household prop and stay", Sevasti Taktikou was the author's cultural adviser in the matter of local women's business. As a woman in her mid-40s, with four daughters, she was amply qualified for this role.

Taktikou is now, of course, long dead, but recently, in Sydney, I met with Stella Koulianos, the Australian-born daughter of Taktikou's first-born daughter, Maria, who migrated to Australia in 1960 to marry the Kalymnian man to whom she was betrothed. Fifty-five-year-old Koulianos, who has a PhD in evolutionary biology and teaches biology at a Sydney girls' school, has put me in touch with her cousin Georgia Tsirigoti, who has a PhD in physics, which she teaches at one of the island's high schools. (What Clift described as Taktikou's "obsession to give each of her daughters an education" has been more than fulfilled in her granddaughters.)

Dusk is falling as Tsirigoti and her husband Nikos – also a physics teacher – arrive at my hotel, and we talk in the garden courtyard, under a bougainvillea that is

only a shade brighter than Tsirigoti's magenta-coloured hair. In the faces of both Tsirigoti and Koulianos I can discern traces of the strong features of their maternal grandmother, as captured in a photograph taken by Australian artist Cedric Flower, who joined Clift and Johnston on Kalymnos for a few weeks during the summer of 1955.

"I have so many pictures of her – wry, sardonic, passionate, gentle, raffish, sad," Clift wrote of Taktikou. "But alive, every one of them, warm and breathing and alive." Appropriately, in Cedric Flower's photograph, Taktikou is holding out to Clift a bowl of fruits, as if she were the archetypal Earth Mother; it is clear that for the Australian woman, newly arrived in a bewildering, alien culture, the older Greek woman was the surrogate mother who taught her to shop and cook and keep house in the local manner. So what of the cultural analysis that Clift seems to have taken from Taktikou? How true is that?

Georgia Tsirigoti spent only a year of her childhood on Kalymnos; her father's occupation as a police officer caused him to move his family about, between the island of Rhodes, the Peloponnese, and the city of Thessaloniki. Given Tsirigoti's familiarity with other parts of Greece, I'm especially interested to get her take on the island's social organisation. I begin: "In the book, Charmian says that, underneath the power that Kalymnian men appear to have ..."

Tsirigoti finishes my sentence: "women govern."

I check: "Do you think this is particularly true of Kalymnos?"

"Yes! Because most of the men were travelling, because of the sponges. Even now, a lot of men are working as sailors – captains or mechanics. They travel a lot. So the women are the boss of the house."

I recount my previous day's conversation with Hatzismalis and his mate, and I quote Hatzismalis' assertion that "We Kalymnian men are very happy."

Again, Tsirigoti spontaneously agrees. "Yes. Because they have nothing to worry about. All the hard decisions are taken by the women – the wives – not by the men. The men are free to go away to work, and to come back to Kalymnos and live a while with their friends, and then leave again. And this is how it is, even now." I see Tsirigoti's husband, who is Athenian, silently agreeing.

This contract between men and women is expressed not in a written pre-nup but in something that is often literally concrete: a house. After describing the ongoing power of the Triple Goddess, Clift writes in *Mermaid Singing*: "The apparent fact of male supremacy must be set against the older and more significant fact that property here descends through the female line, from mother to eldest daughter."

I ask Tsirigoti: "Does the property still go down through the women's line?"

"Yes." After some discussion in Greek with Nikos, she clarifies: "Even now – not so strictly now, but even now – it is tradition to give every daughter a house."

This house is the bride's *prika*, her dowry. After the wedding, the groom moves in. And if the marriage does not work, Clift explained, "it is not the woman who is turned out of the house".

Little wonder, I think, that on Kalymnos, people talk endlessly of houses, but not as we do in Australia, as a matter of monetary value. Here the house is the source of a woman's power, in real terms.

Post-war poverty, shared by almost everyone on the island, as well as her husband's incurable illness, meant that Sevasti Taktikou was glad of the small wage Clift paid her for domestic assistance. But Taktikou was also a woman of property. To her first-born daughter, the mother of Australian-born Stella Koulianos, she bequeathed a couple of shops and an apartment. Tsirigoti's mother, Irini, inherited the house that Taktikou herself lived in. It no longer exists, but in the 1980s, Irini built her own house on the land it had occupied; Tsirigoti and her husband have been

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NADIA WHEATLEY

living in it since they moved to the island with their infant son in 2002.

Feeling somewhat obtrusive, I ask if I might come and photograph Tsirigoti at her house. The answer once more is an immediate and enthusiastic "Yes!" After we decide on Monday evening for the photo shoot, I'm given elaborate written instructions for the taxi driver. (In the part of the town where Tsirigoti lives, houses are identified by the names of their owners.)

For the moment, it is time for me to go to the house of another fully empowered Kalymnian woman – Giorgos Hatzismalis' wife, Themenoula. Over a meal that includes a local soft white cheese and a *kataifi* to die for, I meet the couple's daughter Anna, another teacher, who like so many of the island's young people, has come back after completing tertiary education offshore. Into the room bounces Themenoula's nine-year-old niece (another Anna) and sister Alexia, who are over on holiday from – you guessed it: Darwin.

Is Kalymnos an outpost of Australia, or Australia a colony of Kalymnos?

Alexia, who works as an accredited translator, informs me that two-thirds of Darwin's 15,000 Greek-Australian citizens are of Kalymnian heritage. Someone else has told me that two-thirds of Kalymnos's 16,000 residents have dual nationality, the majority of them Australian. Although the federal government's 1954 scheme to import Kalymnian sponge divers failed to get off the ground, the islanders went anyway. And perhaps the idea of Australia as a new future was in part planted by the two writers who came here looking for a new life. I like to think so, anyway.



Above: the author with Stella Koulianos, another of Taktikou's granddaughters, in Sydney. Left: the plaque outside Clift and Johnston's Kalymnos home.



THE BOOK launch is this evening. I make my way along the waterfront to the municipality's cultural centre, where about 100 Kalymnians are gathered among an array of marble and granite busts, glass cases crammed with statuettes, and paintings of heroic scenes from the island's mythological and historic past. From the podium where I sit with the other speakers, I look over the front row of visiting and local dignitaries to an expanse of sea still glittering blue in the fading light.

"*Thalassaki mou ...*" As the speeches conclude, people burst into a maritime folk song with a haunting melody. Although literally, the title means *My Little Sea*, the diminutive suffix also renders the sense of *My Beloved*

Sea, and I am moved to tears. But it is Arthur Spyrou, the Australian ambassador, who sums up the significance of this event for me. Athenian-born Spyrou is an Australian poet as well as a career diplomat; unlike me, he's able to read *Mermaid Singing* equally in the original and in translation. "It is rare to find a writer who has a voice that resonates as strongly in Greek as it does in English," he tells me. Pointing out that "many times it takes an outsider to get to the heart of what is authentic and beautiful in a society", he adds that "when an external eye and a sensitive mind really appreciates a people and their culture, what we have is something unique."

Around us, the room is buzzing, as books sell like hot *kataifi*; outside, at the buffet tables, people are eating and drinking and chatting, and I think how Clift, an enthusiastic party-goer as well as a great party-giver, would have adored her *glendi* (celebration). As the crowd finally begins to dwindle, Giorgos Hatzismalis marshals a group of us – the speakers, the metropolitan (bishop), the island's vice-mayor (a woman), and of course ambassador Spyrou – and leads us down the *plateia* to a section of wall below an unassuming yellow façade, where the Australian ambassador unveils a newly installed plaque. Adorned with the flags of Greece and Australia, the simple text written in both Greek and English advises passers-by that the Australian writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift lived and worked in this house during 1954–1955.

George Johnston's name may come first here, I think, but on this island where houses belong to the women, this will always be known as "Charmian's house". ■

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