

Remembering Charmian Clift

On the morning of Wednesday 9 July 1969, Australian newspapers carried the front page story of a suicide attempt in a Sydney hotel by British singer Marianne Faithfull, whose boyfriend, Mick Jagger, was playing the lead role in a film about Ned Kelly. Buried towards the back of the evening editions was the information that journalist Miss Charmian Clift had ‘died in her sleep at midnight, after no hint of illness’.

The next day, Clift fans started ringing the switchboard of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Herald*, which since November 1964 had published a weekly essay by Charmian Clift. Initially invited to write about the changes to her homeland that she had noticed after returning from a decade spent on a Greek island, Clift’s column had rapidly become a phenomenon. Although these ‘sneaky little revolutions’ (as Clift once called her pieces) were often far to the left of mainstream opinion, the conversational intimacy of her voice meant that her readers felt they personally knew the writer.

Despite the tact of the media, people soon realised that her death was a suicide. For most of Charmian’s friends as well as her fans, it was impossible to believe that a woman who seemed to epitomise life could choose to end it. (Hadn’t she written that she had never worn a watch because that had always ‘seemed like wearing your death on your wrist?’)

Out of character though it was, the manner of her dying has unfortunately added to a legend that memorialises Charmian Clift for all the wrong reasons. With her books out of print for over a decade, the real woman who wrote them has largely been forgotten.

Instead, there is a growth industry in the portrayal of Charmian Clift and her husband, fellow-writer George Johnston, as the protagonists in a Greek tragedy, with a supporting cast of international celebrities that includes Leonard Cohen, and a plot that laces together gossip about ancient infidelities with accounts of alcohol-fuelled brawls and unpaid bills, of jealousy, of ageing beauty and (worst of all) the crime of being a neglectful mother. It is, of course, the location that is the drawcard. The small island of Hydra, with its amphitheatre of eighteenth-century mansions encircling the jewelled waters of the small port, is the perfect stage — or indeed, film set— for these sagas.

In fact, it was this already in Clift's day.

In her own account of a summer on Hydra, *Peel Me a Lotus* (published in 1959), the writer mocks the film stars and their hangers-on who have overtaken the island that in winter was a refuge for Charmian and George and the small colony of expatriate writers and artists who were their friends. The book's title alluded to the famous Mae West line— 'Peel me a grape!'— which Clift ironically combined with the notion of the mythical lotus-eaters, whom the Homeric hero Odysseus discovered lolling about on an island covered with narcotic plants. The deep irony now is that Clift and Johnston are themselves depicted as exactly the kind of idle parasite whom she abhorred.

Thus there are many accounts of the couple going to their local grocery-shop-cum-taverna for a drink at midday, but few acknowledgements of the fact that they regularly started work at dawn. In their ten years in Greece, Johnston and Clift between them produced fourteen novels and two travel books.

Distance from their markets, together with a tax system that hit them simultaneously in three countries, meant that proceeds of this work were patchy. The

reason why these writers headed for the port at midday was the hope that the post-bag aboard the daily steamer arriving from Athens might include a cheque. No one who has a regular income can grasp how nerve-wracking it is to live from one royalty period to another, never knowing how book sales are going. On one occasion in Greece, when the payment from a novel had failed to live up to expectations, Charmian sat weeping in the stair well of her house. 'It is not being poor that matters,' she explained, 'but knowing that one is going to *go on being poor*.'

On Hydra, at least, a writer's seasonal and unpredictable way of earning a living was understood by the local shopkeepers. There the couple were able to live like sponge-divers: booking up groceries and carafes of retsina against the time when their ship would come in. These bills were inflated by the drinks George bought for other people, including those who would later slander the couple. By now, this evidence of the spite of a claustrophobic little foreign colony has been blown into epic proportions.

A week before Charmian Cliff's death, public debate over the casting of Mick Jagger in the Ned Kelly film occasioned her to write a piece about the folk hero's iconic depiction by her old friend, the artist Sidney Nolan. During a wild winter on Hydra, Charmian and George had spent many a night talking with Nolan about the nature of myths. Now she quoted a recent conversation, in which the painter had commented that a story becomes a myth when 'people pour passion into it, and it gets round like a pebble, and ultimately it comes to represent something basic in the community'.

So what basic need in our community is filled by the myth of two Australian writers getting drunk and having an occasional sexual fling on a small Greek island before most of us were born?

If the portrayal of the couple's lives in the manner of an article in *Who* magazine were just entertainment, it wouldn't much matter. Johnston and Clift themselves fictionalized aspects of their autobiography. But myths contain morals and warnings. They are a conservative force, binding people together by expressing and upholding safe social values. The myth that has been made of the lives of these two writers serves to undermine their political message.

By leaving secure jobs and taking their young children to live on a Greek island, Charmian Clift and George Johnston are exemplars of a kind of freedom that is dangerous to the social fabric. Long before it became the fashion for retirees to escape to Tuscany or Byron Bay in order to renovate houses and visit the local produce market, the Johnstons gambled their livelihoods and their very lives on their sea-change. It is not surprising that the moral of the tale presents their escape as a failure or even a nightmare.

While George Johnston's death from tuberculosis is a dire warning against living in damp Greek mansions, Charmian Clift's suicide provides the ultimate reassurance that it is better to stay home with the mortgage and the superannuation fund.

The mythic portrayal of the Hydra period further subverts these writers' message by taking them out of their historical context. In fact, their decade of exile is book-ended by their engagement in the turbulent politics of the Cold War and the 1960s, back in their homeland.

Charmian Clift and George Johnston left Australia in 1951 as part of a wave of artists and intellectuals who could not abide the culturally stultifying and politically conservative society under Prime Minister Menzies. In particular, Clift was smarting from an attack on an ABC radio program in which she had criticized the government's economic policy. Johnston's articles about China had been censored.

When Charmian and George returned to Australia in 1964, Menzies was still in power and many aspects of the society were unchanged. Again both writers were outspoken critics of government policy, but because Clift had the weekly

forum of her column it was she who was the front-runner.

Within weeks of the introduction of conscription, she challenged it. Five years before the first Moratorium, she spoke out against the Vietnam War. Long before the word ‘multiculturalism’ was heard in this country, she spoke up for migrants. At a time when many Australians still referred to England as ‘Home’, she reminded us that we were part of Asia. Supporting her friend, Faith Bandler, she urged readers to vote YES in the 1967 referendum on Aboriginal civil rights. When other people of her generation railed against youthful demonstrators, she reminded Australians of the right of dissent. She weighed in against patriarchy, and Big Daddy. She asked why, in our affluent society, there was such a gap between the ‘Haves’ and the ‘Have Nots’. As for Greece — she sentenced herself to exile from that country by publicly opposing the right-wing military Junta that seized power in 1967. When she died, the secretary of the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Greece wrote to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, saying that ‘Every Greek democrat is mourning her premature death and is inspired by her example and her struggle for the dignity of man.’ Other readers, male as well as female, described the ‘void’ left in their lives.

In an essay titled ‘What are you doing it for?’, Charmian Clift herself once wrote: ‘A whole human life of struggle, bravery, defeat, triumph, hope, and despair, might be remembered, finally, for one drunken escapade.’

Her own such escapade was on the night 8 July 1969, when too much alcohol and a sense of being trapped led her to take an overdose of sleeping tablets. Like the highly publicised overdose of the rock star’s girlfriend that same night, this was a spontaneous cry for help. The tragedy is that, in Charmian’s case, no one heard. But this does not invalidate her message of liberation, which she wanted not just for herself, but for all.

Fifty years on, the anniversary of her death is an opportunity to celebrate the political contribution of Charmian Clift, whose weekly ‘revolutions’ played a

significant part in the transformative change that was going on in our country during the latter half of the 1960s, a change that was made manifest in 1972 when the majority of electors affirmed that it was time to set aside the Menzies era. Surely this is a story larger than legend.