

## Introduction ‘Sneaky Little Revolutions’

Imagine Australia in August 1964...

It is a place where there is no internet, no email, no social media. People read their news printed on paper. They communicate with each other by what is now called snail mail. Yes, there is television (black and white, naturally) but Australian shows are limited to news and current affairs. There is no local film industry, and live theatre is dominated by plays from Britain and America. Censorship laws are draconian. Pubs and cinemas are closed on Sundays. There is so little concept of architectural conservation that building sites in Sydney and Melbourne proudly bear the demolition company’s sign: ‘Whelan the Wrecker Was Here.’

If the cultural landscape is stultifying, the political scene is moribund. For fifteen years, there has been a single prime minister. Elected in 1949 to head the first Coalition government of the Liberal and Country parties, Sir Robert Gordon Menzies — ‘Ming’ to his supporters, ‘Pig Iron Bob’ to his class enemies — is a patriarchal autocrat more suited to another place and time. But he is not the only fossil.

The White Australia Policy, introduced in 1901, is still in force. So is capital punishment. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not counted in the census. Many Anglo-Australians still refer to England as ‘Home’, despite never having visited the place. (International travel is prohibitively expensive.) Although hundreds of thousands of immigrants from Europe have arrived since the war, for them, as for Aboriginal people, assimilation is required.

In 1964, the word ‘feminism’ is understood to mean the turn-of-the-century campaign for women’s suffrage. Women are excluded from public bars and many jobs, and working mothers are still the subject of criticism and controversy. It is

difficult for unmarried women to get the Pill, and there is no social security for single mothers. Homosexuality is on the criminal code in all states.

Foreign policy is still oriented towards the needs of our traditional ally, Great Britain. In 1962 the government sent thirty military advisors to support the American presence in South Vietnam, but two years later our military commitment there has only grown to 200 personnel. Most Australians have little awareness of what is going on in that conflict—or anywhere else in Asia. To many, ‘the Chinese’ means the local Chinese restaurant, which is the only eatery in the shopping centre apart from the Greek milk bar.

In short, Australia is a white monoculture, safe, self-assured, smug. Dad goes to work, Mum stays home and does the housework, and the kids are pretty much seen and not heard...

This was the Australia that greeted writer Charmian Clift when she stepped off the Greek migrant ship *Ellenis* on a wild wet night in August 1964, accompanied by two teenagers and an eight-year-old. She would describe herself as ‘an odd sort of migrant’; unlike her fellow-passengers, who were arriving in an unknown land, she was ‘migrating to home’.

Born on 30 August, 1923, in the last of a straggle of weatherboard workers' cottages on the outskirts of the New South Wales coastal township of Kiama, Charmian Clift was bequeathed a double legacy by her birthplace. On the one hand, her consciousness was shaped by the wild beauty and freedom of living so close to the beach that there would be seaweed draped on the front fence of the family home after a storm. On the other hand, she grew up with a sense of living on the outside— at ‘the end, rather than the beginning of somewhere’. Rebellious, ambitious, and fiercely

intelligent, she was desperate 'to get out into the big bad world and do something better than anyone else could do'.

It was beauty rather than brains that brought her escape. In May 1941, a photograph of Charmian in a swimsuit won a Beach Girl competition run by *Pix* magazine. With the money, she was able to move to Sydney 'on the search for glamour'. This first foray into the world led to disaster. At the end of 1942, the nineteen-year-old gave birth to an illegitimate child; under pressure from family, the young mother offered her daughter for adoption.

A year later, Charmian made a fresh start by enlisting in the Australian Women's Army Service. Given the task of editing a news sheet for the Ordnance Corps, the vivacious young service woman soon attracted the attention of Brigadier Sir Errol Knox, who in civilian life was managing director of Melbourne's *Argus* newspaper. She joined his staff as soon as she was demobilised.

On one of her first days at her new job she met the colleague who was known as 'Golden Boy' because of his astonishing facility at writing and his innate charm. Now thirty-three, George Johnston had been one of Australia's leading war correspondents, covering conflicts in Asia and the Pacific. Although he had a wife and a young child, he'd had a number of girlfriends while he was stationed overseas. This time, it was different. The chemistry ignited between this charismatic man and this magnetic young woman instantly became 'the *scandale* of the office'. When Charmian Clift was summarily dismissed, George Johnston resigned in protest.

This was the beginning of a partnership that would continue through twenty-three years, thirty books, and three children. By the time they married, in August 1947, their first child was well on the way and their first collaborative novel was finished. When it won a major literary award, the newspaper headline announced

‘JOURNALIST, WIFE WIN NOVEL PRIZE’. Throughout her subsequent literary career, Clift would continue to be treated as her husband’s helpmeet.

In early 1951, the couple, now with two young children, moved to London, where Johnston had been appointed to run the European office of Associated Newspaper Services. Keen to leave the conservatism of Menzies’ Australia, Charmian hoped that ‘London would be big enough to contain the wonder or the sign’ that was her ‘inalienable right to claim as her own’. Soon, however, she began to feel she was losing her identity in the vastness of the city. A holiday trip to Greece in the spring of 1954 held out the promise of a new world, and a new way of life. At the end of that year the Johnstons rented a house on the island of Kalymnos — a barren and isolated place where sponge diving was the only source of income. As George worked on a novel and the children (now aged seven and five) settled into their new school, Charmian began to write a journal. Within a few months this would develop into a book called *Mermaid Singing*.

Published in 1956 as a ‘travel book’, it would now be categorised as memoir or creative non-fiction. At the time, it broke the mould of the travel genre, which mostly involved accounts by men of journeys through arduous and often dangerous terrain. In contrast to this, *Mermaid Singing* was a lyrical and deeply personal account of life on a remote and poverty-stricken island, as experienced by a woman, a mother, and a housewife. The author wrote of buying vegetables at market and cooking them in her single saucepan; of living without a flushing toilet; of helping her children through their initial pining for peanut butter. With great affection, she wrote too about the crippled sponge divers and young widows who were her new neighbours and friends. And — drawing on her Greek mythology as well as her personal observations — she described a type of women’s power that had its roots in the ancient cult of the

Triple Goddess. Four decades before Frances Mayes' best-selling *Under the Tuscan Sun* established a new publishing market, *Mermaid Singing* was an intimate memoir by a western woman who exchanges 'civilisation' for the riches of village life. Yet while Clift's first book deserves celebration in its own right as a trailblazer, it would prove to be a prentice run for the writing and the persona that the author would employ a decade later in her essays.

Splendid though Kalymnos was, it was a little too remote. When summer was over, the Johnstons moved to the breathtakingly beautiful island of Hydra — only three hours from Athens on the daily ferry service. A few months later, in April 1956, their third child was born in the house that would be the family's home for the next nine years.

In Hydra's small and tightly-knit community of artists and expatriates, Charmian Clift felt like an insider for the first time in her life. Although always a painstakingly slow writer, in this sustaining environment she completed a second memoir of island life — *Peel Me a Lotus* — and followed this with the novels *Walk to the Paradise Gardens* and *Honour's Mimic*.

Through these years in Greece, George Johnston's health deteriorated as a result of the tuberculosis he had contracted during the war. In the autumn of 1962, believing that he might have time for only one more book, he made a start on a novel inspired by his experience of growing up in Melbourne at the time of the First World War and Great Depression. Putting aside her own autobiographical novel, Charmian sat on the step of the room where he worked and — as Johnston recalled — 'Through that entire winter we talked and talked and remembered and remembered and I wrote *My Brother Jack*.'

This novel provided a ticket home for George, who returned alone for the book's launch at the Adelaide Festival in March 1964. During a visit to Melbourne soon afterwards, he met up with an old journalist mate who was now a senior editor for the Melbourne *Herald*. When Charmian arrived in Australia a few months later, this colleague invited her to write 'some regular pieces' for his newspaper. Johnston later noted that the editor 'was not at all sure what these pieces were to be... sort of essays, he thought... anything she liked. He explained that he was not looking for a woman journalist, but a writer. The daily press needed some writing, real writing, from a woman's point of view.'

While this brief might not sound revolutionary, at the time it was doubly so. To most Australians, an 'essay' was either something produced as school homework or it was a dreary piece by some antiquated English writer—again, often connected with the school curriculum. And a woman's point of view was not something that was usually canvassed in any circle, let alone the press.

For Charmian Clift, this invitation was a job description made in heaven. The genre of the essay — with its first-person voice, its discursiveness, and its idiosyncratic point of view — was exactly the type of writing she had employed in her two island memoirs, where she had described Greek society from the viewpoint of a woman. From her very first 'piece', the essayist found her voice: intelligent, conversational, and intensely personal.

On 6 November 1964 this first essay — appropriately titled 'Coming Home' — was published in the Melbourne *Herald*. A couple of weeks later, this same piece appeared in the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Over the coming months, Clift's column would become a regular weekly feature of both publications, and the columnist would develop a devoted readership in both cities.

In this initial essay, the writer assessed her impressions gained over the first two months in her homeland. It was an unusual viewpoint, for someone to be both native-born and (as she put it) 'half alien'. In the short time since her return, Clift noted, she had been told 'over and over again' with a certain complacency: '*The old place has changed quite a bit since you saw it last.*' Turning this statement into a series of questions, the essayist asked: Had Australia really changed since the immediate post-war period? If so, how? Were these changes superficial or profound? For better or worse? Certainly, she found 'safety, plenty, prosperity,' but the plenty led to consumerism and waste, and the affluence and security seemed to mitigate against traditional Australian qualities of independence, fearlessness and originality. Explaining that what she was looking for was 'evidence of a spiritual change', she went on to declare that the country's goal should not be a borrowed culture, but 'an Australian way of life developed naturally from its landscape, climate and its own heritage'.

And yet, despite a certain level of disappointment, this newly-arrived migrant felt there was also a sense of 'imminence' — as if something was *about* to happen. In this perception, she could not have been more right. Over the next few years, as Australia began to go through a rapid political and social metamorphosis, Charmian Clift would turn her skills of observation and analysis upon her own country and compatriots, just as she had examined the people and place of Greece in *Mermaid Singing* and *Peel me a Lotus*. Indeed, her weekly essays, if read sequentially, form a third 'travel memoir'.

As luck would have it, the first episode in Australia's political transformation occurred only few days after the publication of Clift's first column. On 10 November

1964, the prime minister announced sweeping changes to the country's defence program; these included not only the introduction of conscription but conscription for overseas service. Clearly, the government was planning on ramping up the number of Australian troops sent to Vietnam. It would take a few years before scenes of the war, and of demonstrations against the war, would appear on a nightly basis on the nation's television screens, but Charmian Clift and George Johnston immediately took note.

Within a month of Menzies' announcement, their elder son had a party in the family home to celebrate his seventeenth birthday. As well as the school friends of their two teenage children, the guests included other 'Oldies' — 'prosperous, middle aged, middle class and in the main conservative people'. Everyone was talking about conscription. All opposed it to some degree, but there was particular outrage against the system of selection by means of a lottery barrel.

Clift's piece 'On Lucky Dips' was the result. It is not the greatest of her essays, but it is notable for four reasons. First, because of the radicalism of her views. Second, because she presented a *vox pop*, based on the views both of her contemporaries and of the youngsters at the party. Third, because she welcomed readers into her home and her family life, including the life of her kids. Fourth, because this is the only one of her completed pieces that I have not been able to find in published form. Was this essay rejected for political reasons by the newspaper editors? If so, this was the last time Clift would be censored.

In the third of her published pieces, titled 'Second Class Citizens', Clift directly followed the mandate given to her, and addressed her constituency — women. 'I am one too', she began. And added: 'The battle is on.' Although there were a great many men among her devoted followers, the core Clift readership was comprised of the people whom she affectionately called her 'Thursday ladies'. Like

most of Clift's generation of women, they typically lived in the suburbs and occupied themselves with running their homes and looking after their husbands and children. To them, the weekly Clift column was a chance to have a chat over the kitchen table with a likeminded woman — with a friend.

This conversation worked both ways.

Every day at the columnist's Sydney home, Terry the postman delivered bundles of letters containing comments, queries and anecdotes from fans. Although answering this correspondence made Clift feel at times like Sisyphus rolling an enormous paper ball uphill, she was in no doubt that her mail represented the other half of a fascinating dialogue:

Sometimes a communication lands upon my desk that sings for me so sweet and clear, person to person as it were, that I turn giddy all over with enchantment...

It's like an exciting conversation. I say this. You say, yes but. And ideally we should be off.

As well as giving her a great deal of pleasure, the letters (Clift said) provided her with 'an indication of the thoughts and opinions and angers and philosophies of a very wide range of people'. Sometimes, she would quote correspondents in a later column. In this way, the correspondence was a blog — three decades before blogging became a 'thing'.

As Clift's popularity soared, it brought about a change in her working arrangements.

Around the middle of 1965, the senior journalist John Douglas Pringle took over the editorship of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Soon afterwards, the managing director, Angus McLachlan, approached him with the idea of putting Charmian Clift on the payroll, rather than just purchasing her material from the Melbourne *Herald*,

for whom Clift was still writing from week to week on a freelance basis. Pringle relayed this decision to the paper's redoubtable Women's Editor, Maggie Vaile, who declared herself to be 'delighted'. After this, Clift's copy went to Maggie on a Saturday, was published in the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Women's Section on the following Thursday and appeared in the Melbourne *Herald* on the subsequent Saturday.

Although the payment for these pieces was modest, this new arrangement gave Charmian Clift a form of financial security that was now crucial. In August 1965, she became the family breadwinner when her husband's deteriorating health took him back to hospital, where he would remain for eight months.

Just as important as the money, the new arrangement was an affirmation of the writer's success. While it was most unusual for the head of a newspaper company to involve himself in a decision to employ a columnist (especially for the women's pages!), Angus McLachlan's action was particularly significant because the Clift column was well to the left of the editorial policy of the Fairfax-owned *Sydney Morning Herald*, which was committed to supporting the government position on Vietnam.

On at least one occasion, Clift's piece 'damn near got [her] the sack'. ('J.D. Pringle was *furious!*' she wrote in a note to a friend.) Yet for the Fairfax management, the bottom line was that Charmian Clift attracted readers, and this helped sell the newspaper's advertising space. In September 1965, Clift's column (with her photo at the top) was moved to the prime position of page 2 in the Women's Section, opposite the social notes. At the same time the large retailer Grace Bros, which had formerly advertised only intermittently in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, bought the major

advertising space on this page 2/3 spread on a regular basis, specifying that its advertisements were to be placed near the Clift column.

This support from a major advertising subscriber, coupled with the volume of Clift's mail (which arrived at the newspaper before being directed to her home address), strengthened Charmian Clift's editorial freedom. She herself was in no doubt about how subversive her role was. A couple of months after being put on the *Sydney Morning Herald* payroll, the author summed up the year since her return to Australia in a letter to her London literary agent:

This has all been so new and so invigorating in a mad sort of way. I think I like it. At least it is a country where you can still make things happen instead of waiting for them to happen. I have been making my own sneaky little revolutions [...] by writing essays for the weekly presses to be read by people who don't know an essay from a form-guide, but absolutely love it.

The columnist's 'sneaky little revolutions' became more and more radical as the Sixties raced on. Her first piece for 1966, 'On a Lowering Sky in the East', revealed a new strength of political concern, in response to Australian's growing commitment to the Vietnam War. In April 1965, Australia had sent an infantry battalion. Twelve months later, 4500 more troops, including the first overseas conscripts, went to Vietnam amid (a *Sydney Morning Herald* headline noted) 'mounting controversy'. That week, in 'Banners, Causes and Convictions', Clift applauded the change in attitude from the apathy and mental flabbiness of 1964.

But the Vietnam War and women's equality were not the only political issues raised in the Clift column. Long before the word 'multiculturalism' was coined, the columnist spoke up loudly and consistently for the people who were then called 'migrants' or 'New Australians'. Supporting her friend, Faith Bandler, she urged readers to vote YES in the 1967 referendum on Aboriginal civil rights. When others

of her generation railed against youthful demonstrators, she reminded Australians of the right of dissent. She weighed in against patriarchy, personified as ‘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. Consumerism, ugly architecture, intolerance, censorship, the need for a local film industry, even local government restrictions on outdoor dining—all these causes and more were canvassed. No matter how radical the essayist’s views, however, her voice was never strident. She was well aware that ‘if you’re raging to say your say ... you still have to find how to say it within a compass that is acceptable (“Don’t do it in the street and frighten the horses”)

As well, in this body of work that amounts to a kind of travel memoir, there are travel pieces — about Central Australia and the Gulf Country, about London and Hydra and the Cotswolds — and memoir, in the form of moving tributes to the author’s mother, father and brother, and pieces about her children at various rites of passage: starting high school, becoming engaged, flying the coop. And there are what could be called traditional essay topics, such as ‘The Sounds of Summer’, ‘The Magic of Mornings’, ‘The Joys of a City’. Overall, readers opening their newspapers to the Clift column would not know whether they would get the political, the domestic, or the pastoral. The unexpectedness was part of the appeal.

Even in her most personal and domestic pieces, however, Clift was making her ‘sneaky little revolutions’. Indeed, as her letter to her agent shows, it was the form of the classical essay, appearing in the context of the Women’s pages of a daily newspaper, which she regarded as revolutionary.

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But the column came with a high personal cost.

In ‘The Modern Essay’, Virginia Woolf points out the vital distinction between the public and private self of the essayist: ‘Never to be yourself, and yet always — that is the problem.’

While the persona the essayist adopted gives the impression that she is open and gregarious, eager to share her most intimate thoughts with strangers, Charmian Clift was a very private writer, and an even more private person. Exposing herself to the reading public undermined her deepest reserves. As well — as she noted in ‘On Being Unable to Write an Article’ — she had each week to deal with a ‘chronic recurring paralysis of the talent’, with ‘the most terrible feeling, of panic and desolation, of terror, of the most awful loss’. This was not the only burden the writer was carrying.

If part of Charmian Clift’s greatness is that she was politically far in advance of her time, it was a part of her tragedy that she was born a couple of decades too early for second wave feminism.

Again and again, her life epitomises the difficulties caused by the secondary status of women in her era. Forced to give up her daughter for adoption, she suffered the ongoing grief of relinquishment. Although George nobly jumped to her support, it was Charmian who was sacked for their affair. Most galling of all was the way the literary world regarded her as playing second fiddle to her husband: the success of the column could not equal the accolades for *My Brother Jack*. And, deeply though she loved George and their three children, she always struggled with balancing her responsibilities as a wife and a mother against her burning need to write. Being George’s primary carer through the decade of his terminal illness was another huge

burden. Perhaps worst of all was the fact that her autobiographical novel, *The End of the Morning*, had to be put aside again and yet again.

In an essay titled 'What are you doing it for?', Charmian Clift 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 a cry for help, which no one heard.

On the night 8 July 1969, after drinking a great deal, she took an overdose of sleeping tablets. Towards the back of the evening editions of the next day's paper was the information that journalist Miss Charmian Clift had 'died in her sleep at midnight, after no hint of illness'.

Despite the tact of the media, people soon realised that the death was a suicide. Clift fans started jamming the telephone switchboard of the *Sydney Morning Herald* and the *Melbourne Herald* and sending letters expressing love for Charmian Clift and support for her family. On Saturday, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a small selection of these. The secretary of the Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Greece wrote 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. 'Thursday won't be Thursday any more,' one lamented.

For many of Charmian's readers, it was impossible to believe that a woman who seemed to epitomise life could choose to end it. This sense of incomprehension did not diminish with time. Over the twenty years that it took me to write *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift*, I spoke with fans as well as old friends and colleagues. Almost invariably, people would ask, 'Why did she do it?' This question revealed the

ongoing bafflement, even shock, that Charmian Clift — who always described herself as ‘a Yay-sayer’ — could abandon hope. In the biography, I give a number of reasons why she felt trapped, depressed and fearful at that time. But I too struggle with the apparent paradox.

Three years after Clift’s death, in December 1972, the ‘imminence’ that she had perceived came to fulfilment in the election of the Whitlam government. This was due in some considerable part to the votes of the kind of Australians who were Clift’s ‘Thursday ladies’ and yes, their husbands too. Her column was a crucial part in the making of this wave of change.

Within a fairly short time, many of the things she’d hoped for came to be. The Women’s Movement. Multiculturalism. Australian films and theatre. Even café tables on footpaths. The greatest change, given Clift’s urging to ‘let Asia in’, has been the end of the White Australia policy and the wave of migration from the Asia-Pacific region. Of course, most of these changes are still happening.

Just last week, I received an email from a man declaring himself to be ‘a latter-day Clift fan’. A teenager when the pieces were first published, he did not know of them. ‘Now I find so many of them are prescient for today’, he declares.

Quite.

Fifty years on — knowing what we do of Clift’s views — we can play the game of imagining her response to things such as Australia’s refugee policy, the Me Too movement and the Black Lives Matter campaign. The ongoing disparity in women’s wages. The architectural monstrosity on the harbour at Barangaroo. As for consumerism, and the failure by governments to rise to the challenge of climate change...

If the real life conversation between Clift and her readers was cut short, the re-publication of what is arguably her greatest book — this compilation travel memoir about her own people and her own society — is an opportunity to celebrate the author whose ‘sneaky little revolutions’ set a new benchmark for the literary form of the essay in this country, and at the same time played a significant part in the transformation of Australian society.

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