

## RELIGION AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVE: CLARK'S CONTRIBUTION TO AUSTRALIAN EXPERIMENTAL LITERATURE

George Shaw

What happens to three hundred years of high European civilization when it is consigned to a few not-too-well-educated travellers left stranded upon an island where civilization is unknown? Herein lies the origins of Australia. This same question underlies Manning Clark's *A History of Australia*.<sup>1</sup> Given Clark's rich literary intellect there are bold and decorative shades of Swift in Clark's narrative of the outcome. Such literary allusions abound in all Clark's writings, and are an engaging and distinguishing feature of his *History*.

But Clark's *History* also has an evangelical tug rooted in its intellectual design, and this is quite separate from its piquant style. It was this feature which recruited a new audience to Australian history. Its allure and novelty radiated from a quite heroic *dare*: Clark stood Australia "unabashed before antiquity" and searched for a "steadfast truth" underpinned by a "strong book-mindedness",<sup>2</sup> which took readers through the great texts of earlier civilization in search of an imaginative context for his narrative. Moreover, Clark pictured Australia as originating at an immensely rich moment in time when three potent European cultural streams had intersected with unknown consequences even for Europe. By contrast, no previous historian considered Australia as having any heritage outside the British imperial system or any lineage earlier than the late eighteenth century.

Among the stranded travellers are champions of all three cultures. Clark surveys the outcome with considerable moral rigour. In doing so he dismisses the prevailing intellectual opinion which pictures Australia as still maturing and trapped in a cultural puberty where stern judgment is premature. Clark insists that Australia be judged as the arbiter of its own destiny to date. He admits that there has been too little wisdom for a rich outcome: Sydney is not London, and Henry Lawson is not Wordsworth. But there has been an outcome. It merits study and comment and judgment - indeed, it is demanding of

judgment.

Judgment, especially moral judgment, is the *leit motif* of Clark's narrative. Clark's judgmental stance stems from his profound misgivings about the moral choices of Australians. There are overtones of moral betrayal by English overlords and their colonial lackeys, but Australians are basically a self-betrayed people cursed by their own moral choices: some spring from the folly natural to mankind, others from the exaggerated concupiscence embedded in the culture of the industrial revolution which circumscribes Australia's settlement.

Clark's primary challenge is to fashion a style and a vocabulary which allows him to combine history and judgment and exhortation. To do this he must coin a phraseology (heart dimmers, Dionysian frenzy), accumulate a typology (Ishmaels or Byrons of this world) and stockpile source ideas from a wisdom literature (Dickens, Dostoevsky, Flaubert, Book of Common Prayer, Hymns Ancient and Modern, Henry Lawson) where author and an educated reader can revel in allusion and enriched meaning. The outcome was both experimental and unorthodox as a history.

Three responses followed: one damned Clark for deserting the principles of scientific analysis; one rejoiced to see imagination rescue history from scientific aridity; and one suggested Clark's *History* was a covert novel, a grave misapprehension somewhat succoured by Clark's confession that on visiting Victor Hugo's home he glimpsed the possibility of peopling his *History* as Hugo peopled his novels.<sup>3</sup> In 1993 a fourth, and truly insidious, response surfaced in *Manning Clark's History of Australia* abridged by Michael Cathcart. The exercise is disarmingly justified: "I felt", Cathcart wrote, "...as though *A History* already had an abridgement embedded within it and my sole function was to lay it bare".<sup>4</sup> The outcome reclaims Clark for high-minded secular humanism,<sup>5</sup> by draining off the excess of speculative commentary or the religious gloss which endows it with singularity as a work of Australian historical literature.

Here are two illustrations of how Cathcart's abridgment confounds Clark's vision. Cathcart's intrepid performance begins with a startling excision of the first eighty-one pages of Clark's text. One sentence only is relieved. It is Clark's magisterial opening declaration: "Civilization did not begin in Australia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century". Clark appends to this rudimentary text the entire inaugural discourse in which he stands Australia "unabashed before antiquity": the expansion of Islam, the prizes of the European navigators, the rise of protestantism, the growth of science. By contrast, Cathcart affixes

to this same stately announcement an assortment of facts touching upon fairly inconsequential doings in Portsmouth or London the day the first convict ships set sail for Botany Bay: the weather, summer dress in London parks, the Prince Regent's debts, and the whereabouts of Mr Pitt or Lord Sydney.

## ORIGINAL

[vol.I, pp.3, 81-82\*]

Civilization did not begin in Australia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The reason lies partly in the environment and way of life of the people inhabiting the continent before the coming of the European, and partly in the internal history of those Hindu, Chinese, and Muslim civilizations which colonized and traded in the archipelago of southern Asia. The early inhabitants of the continent created cultures but not civilizations. The first of these were the Negrito people - short, dark-skinned, curly-haired and broad-nosed - who were forced to migrate from their hunting grounds in south-east Asia by the movement into those areas of people of a higher material culture, at a time when Tasmania, Australia and New guinea formed part of the land mass of Asia.

Later another people arrived - the Murrayians, who were related to the Ainu in Japan and ... (here follows pages 3 to 81).

Early on the golden Sunday morning of 13 May, the fleet of eight ships, the Sirius, the Supply, the Alexander, the Charlotte, the Scarborough, the Friendship, the Prince of Wales, and the Lady Penrhyn, together with three store ships, weighed anchor in Portsmouth harbour, and sailed down the channel for the high seas. In the town the shutters in the shops were still lowered, and one clergyman on shore went down on his knees to ask God's forgiveness on all of them. Otherwise no one noticed their departure. In London, the home of over a third of the convicts, and of most of the men responsible for their departure, the weather that day favoured the lovers of riding and walking. The parks presented a fine show of carriages, of smart beaux and nags. The weather favoured too the display of summer dresses, and as the tartan was all the fashion, nothing but highland ladies and lasses were to be seen in the parks. At Carlton House, Mr Pitt was closeted for three hours with the Prince of Wales, discussing the problems of the latter's debts which had by then reached one hundred and sixty-

one thousand pounds. On the movements of Lord Sydney on 13 May history is silent, though there is no reason to suppose that a man for whom votes were the stuff of life pondered what had happened at Portsmouth on that morning.

The press, too, both in the British Isles and western Europe confined itself to the facts without comment. The London Chronicle announced the departure on 15 May, contenting itself with the simple statement that early on Sunday 13 May the transports and convict ships had sailed for Botany Bay. The Dutch press reported the facts likewise ...

\* Underlined material is omitted in the Abridgment

#### ABRIDGMENT

[P.3\*\*]

Civilization did not begin in Australia until the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Early on the golden morning of 13 MAY 1787, a fleet of eight ships, the Sirius, the Supply, the Alexander, the Charlotte, the Scarborough, the Friendship, the Prince of Wales, and the Lady Penrhyn, together with three store ships, weighed anchor in Portsmouth harbour, and sailed down the Channel (sic) for the high seas.

In the town the shutters in the shops were still lowered, and one clergyman on shore went down on his knees to ask God's forgiveness on all of them. Otherwise no one noticed the departure. On board, in addition, to over four hundred seamen, there were 750-odd convicts, 211 marines and officers, 27 officers' wives, 32 children as well as the Governor and his staff of nine - just over 1000 people. In London, the home of over a third of the convicts, the weather that day favoured the lovers of riding and walking. The parks presented a fine show of carriages, of smart beaux and nags. The weather favoured too the display of summer dresses, and as the tartan was all the fashion, nothing but highland laddies (sic) and lasses were to be seen in the parks. At Carlton House, the Prime Minister, Mr William Pitt, was closeted for three hours with the Prince of Wales, discussing the problems of the latter's debts, which had by then reached 161 000 pounds. On the movements of the Secretary of the Home Office, Lord Sydney, on 13 May history is silent. He had been a forceful advocate of the expedient of transporting British prisoners to New South Wales, but there is no reason to suppose that a man for whom votes were the stuff of life pondered what had happened

at Portsmouth that morning. The London Chronicle contented itself with the simple statement that early on Sunday 13 May the transports and convict ships had sailed for Botany Bay.

\*\* Underlined material inserted into the Abridgment

Here at the outset we confront the inordinate contrast between the author who spent years in the "fog" agonizing over a context for his narrative,<sup>6</sup> and the abbreviator who simply discards it entirely as a trivial detour into irrelevances. To see Clark's vision replaced by an odd concoction of banalities (admittedly selected freely from Clark's own text) is a forewarning that readers are in for some hefty confusion between what is substance and embellishment in Clark's text.

Had Cathcart allowed Clark's opening sentence to stand alone, as a discreet paragraph, then it might have served as a text for all that followed, much as Tolstoy's free-standing opening to *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way". Clark often cited *Anna Karenina* as owning a great opening. Cathcart appreciates none of this art.

A second example of how Cathcart's pruning impacts adversely on the intention of Clark's narrative is illustrated by turning to volume I, Part III. Here Clark begins the story of how a civil order was put in place in Australia. The narrator's task is to balance what his original players *could not* know with what his readers *do* know. The original players lived with chance. They feared their lives were being gambled on a venture which may well miscarry or be abandoned. By contrast, readers of Clark's text know the original players survived to found a robust civil order which eventually took over the continent. The narrator must therefore unfold two plots: an elementary tale of physical and material struggle and uncertain survival; and a more complex account of those actuating forces which generate civilized communities and then sustain and transform them. Clark meticulously crafts his narrative to advance both plots in tandem, and what often appears to be asides or throwaway remarks serve, on deeper inspection, to bind one plot to the other, and both to what has preceded it.

Let me illustrate this by juxtaposing Clark's opening two paragraphs

of volume I Part III and Cathcart's abridgment.

ORIGINAL  
[vol.I, pp.113-4\*]

By the middle of February 1788 the secular and religious ceremonies to mark the beginning of the colony had been completed. Then the elementary task of housing, feeding, and preserving law and order was begun. In observing their behaviour in those early years when the foundations of civilization were hacked out in that rude and barbarous land, posterity has detected two patterns: how a settlement designed for the punishment and reformation of criminals developed within four years into a colony using convict labour, and how in transplanting a civilization changes quickly emerged in the character of that civilization. Such patterns escaped the mind of those on the spot. They were too preoccupied with the struggle for survival, dismayed by the difficulties of creating any civilization at all in such an alien environment and with such unpromising human material.

In the beginning, all were housed in tents, the Governor in a pre-cut canvas house constructed in London, the sick, the civil and military officers, the marines and

the convicts in tents, and the stores under wretched covers of thatch. By July some of the convicts were housed in huts, though the Governor, the civil and military officers and the marines remained under canvas. Some grumbled that a mere fold of canvas should be their sole check against the rays of the sun in summer or the chilling blasts from the south in the winter. In the meantime, they continued the slow business of building first with canvas, then with wood, and finally with stone, but in all this the unexpected daunted them: the hard wood blunted and bent their tools; there was no suitable lime with which to mix cement; there were too few skilled workers. So they improvised, and made do with what they had.

It was the same with the planting of seed to grow crops and vegetables. The Governor established a government farm under the supervision of a member of his own staff, using the convicts to till the soil. In addition, he granted small plots of land to the civil and military officers, and assigned convicts to work the soil, supplying them with seed and tools to raise grain and vegetables. But again the trees blunted the blades of the axes, the soil blunted the spades

and the picks, and the men whose very aversion to labour had been the occasion of their pursuing the profession of crime had to be driven to labour. Until such time as they couldmaster the problems of husbandry in their new environment, they were dependent on the flour, the meat, the pease and the butter brought from England and the Cape of Good Hope. So long as supplies lasted, these kept them alive, while exposing them to all those disorders to which men subsisting without green vegetables and fruits were liable. By May, the camp on the banks of Sydney Cove began to wear aspects of distress, as great numbers of scorbutic patients were daily seen creeping to and from the hospital tents. Some died, and the Reverend Richard Johnson read over their shallow graves the solemn words "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live" - and reminded those who cocked an ear that hope of a glorious resurrection awaited the dead. By May, Tench had noted that fresh provisions were becoming scarcer than in a blockaded town. The weather in the late summer was oppressive with much rain, thunder and lightning. Flies which bred large living maggots nauseated them; ants bit them severely.

\* Underlined material outlined in Abridgment

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pp.12-3]

By the middle of February 1788 the task of housing, feeding, and preserving law and order had begun. In the beginning, all were housed in tents: Governor [Philip] in a pre-cut canvas house constructed in London, the sick and civil and military officers, the marines [and] the convicts in tents, and the stores under wretched covers of thatch. Some grumbled that a mere fold of canvas should be their sole check against the rays of the sun [as they began] the slow business of building first with canvas, then with wood, and finally with stone, but in all this the unexpected daunted them: the hard wood blunted and bent their tools; there was no suitable lime with which to mix cement; there were too few skilled workers. So they improvised, and made do with what they had.

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assigned convicts to work the soil, supplying them with seed and tools to raise grain and vegetables. But the soil blunted the spades and the picks, and the men whose very aversion to labour had been the occasion of their pursuing the profession of crime had to be driven to labour. Until such time as they could master the problems of husbandry in their new environment, they were dependent on the flour, the meat, the pease and the butter brought from England and the Cape of Good Hope. These kept them alive, while exposing them to all those disorders to which men subsisting without green vegetables and fruits were liable. By May, the camp on the banks of Sydney Cove began to wear the aspects of distress, as great numbers of scorbutic patients were daily seen creeping to and from the hospital tents. Some died, and the Reverend Johnson read over heir shallow graves the solemn words "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live". By May, Tench had noted that fresh provisions were becoming scarcer than in a blockaded town. The weather in the late summer was oppressive[,] with much rain, thunder and lightning. Flies which bred large maggots nauseated them; ants bit them severely.



The first of Clark's two paragraphs is a prefatory reminder of the three facets to his story: the ceremonial (narrated in Part II); the practical, ie "the elementary task of housing, feeding, and preserving law and order" (the subject of this Part); and the unpredictable character of the civilization which springs to life, as implied in the words that "in transplanting a civilization changes quickly emerged in the character of that civilization". The force of the paragraph is to admonish the reader not to overstrain the importance of the material factors about to be discussed or tumble into any heresy about the primacy of material factors in the making of civilization.

Cathcart discards this entire prefatory paragraph apart from a one-and-a-part sentence which announces that the subject in hand is "housing, feeding and preserving law and order". Instead, Cathcart launches instantly into a verbatim reproduction of Clark's description of canvas shelters, provisions and rations, and early dud efforts at farming. All is matter-of-fact. His sole emendation to this passage in Clark's text chops in half the reference to the "Reverend Richard Johnson", slovenly dubbed the "Reverend Johnson". The chaplain is pictured as notifying the living mourners of the famished dead or executed food-thieves that "Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live". (To which the reader responds inwardly: and an extra short time in New South Wales.) When this emendation is considered in conjunction with Cathcart's drastic abridgement of Clark's opening paragraph (which discards Clark's invitation to see complexity in his text) Johnson's words can amount to nothing more than a wry or vapid observation on the human condition. Religion is slimmed down to a disposable throw-away-line, which effectually debunks the ceremonial. This is not Clark's intention.

Clark has Johnson say significantly more than Cathcart allows: "the Reverend Richard Johnson read over their shallow graves the solemn words 'Man that is born of woman hath but a short time to live' - and reminded those who cocked an ear that hope of a glorious resurrection awaited the dead". This is vintage Clark where the themes of despair and hope, or failure and redemption, or death and resurrection, run like sap through his entire narrative. It is also the theme of the Epilogue to the entire enterprise, and emulates the conclusion to *War and Peace*.

Cathcart's uncoupling of death and resurrection is sheer blunder, and discloses a rudimentary ignorance of Clark's intellect. It tampers with the intellectual substance of Clark, while the decoration about ants and maggots is included. Furthermore, Clark's fuller portrait of

Johnson's ceremonial religious role, performed amid the material striving for survival, also contains an allusion to the intangible change beyond human command, and captures the complexity of Clark's text. In the figure of Johnson and through his words which rehearse the wisdom of the *Book of Common Prayer*, Clark declares that in the ventures of people there are other factors at work which mysteriously operate to make for unforeseen consequences.

Most senior officers who landed in New South Wales in the late eighteenth century were versed in the *Book of Common Prayer* or the Scriptures, and employed religious language to articulate a belief in unseen forces. Later generations of Australians utilized the language of more contemporary ideologies (Utilitarianism, Marxism, Fabian Socialism) to affirm their belief in such commanding or inspiring influences or their mysterious outcomes. Clark affirms none of these systems, new or old, in its entirety. Even at their best, Protestantism, Marxism and Utilitarianism failed to create the better society Clark believed Australia had the opportunity to become. (Catholicism is slightly exempted because it accommodated the best in paganism).

Australia might yet become that better society. This is Clark's manifesto in the Epilogues to various volumes. Yet the narrative text is bleak. Nothing in the storyline warrants any optimism. Why, then, did Clark remain hopeful?

The answer is a riddle embedded in the text and inseparable from it: a flirtation with atheism as a prelude to a recovery of religious belief.

Australians must dare to be atheist. This proclamation comes at the beginning and the end of *A History*. In the Retrospect to volume I Clark wrote of the "day when that wealth of love which used to be lavished on Him is turned upon the whole of nature, on the world, on men, and on every blade of grass". In the Epilogue to volume VI Clark continued his plea to Australians "to lavish on each other the love the previous generations had given to God".<sup>7</sup> This is atheist in the sense that Clark depicts God and humanity as being in competition, and he considers the great traditional faiths of Christianity mistaken in demanding that man give way to God. In Australia the God of the old faiths must give way to humanity.

This challenge to Australians to think atheistically will not be itself a liberation. Atheists are often monstrous bullies, as Russian Communism and German Nazism has shown.<sup>8</sup> Atheism is but a step towards a regeneration of religious belief. Clark's optimism is hitched to this regeneration, and the commentary which accompanies his

narrative is suffused with hints to what this religion might be. Four features stand out. *Firstly* believers must uphold the Enlightenment's quest for a more rational world for all humanity. *Secondly* because there is a rudimentary corruption in humanity (shades of Augustine rather than Paul of Tarsus) forgiveness is the supreme human virtue. Clark was excited by Dostoevsky's character who said "If I were God I would forgive everyone".<sup>9</sup> Humanity is most godlike when it can forgive: forgiveness heals, whereas to withhold forgiveness is to deepen corruption and hurt. *Thirdly* Jesus the Galilean is the great exemplar. He is the miracle. Clark repeats from *The Possessed*: "There has never been anything like him before or since ... that is the miracle".<sup>10</sup> Clark singles out two particular qualities in Jesus: his anger at "letter-of-the-law-men, and all heart dimmers", ie those who crush humanity to prosper their own power; and Jesus's capacity to love humanity and be "the man who spoke of love, compassion and forgiveness, the man who loved women". Clark's tutor was Renan.<sup>11</sup> *Fourthly* there is the ideal of the Madonna, miraculously preserved within the Catholic church: the idealization of sensual passion; the idealization of nurture; and the source of a power which can redeem humanity from the hurt of its corruption.

There is no orthodoxy in this, and contradictions abound. Clark's response to inconsistency was disarming: "Well, rather like Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind*, I kept telling myself I would think about it later on".<sup>12</sup>

Clark stockpiled his religious ideas and sentiments from a self-education in European literature, drawing more upon its novelists and poets than its eminent European historians. Then, in the 1940s and 1950s Clark discovered that Australian novelists and poets had also struggled with the great ideas of the Europeans, albeit in an Australian guise.<sup>13</sup> So, when Clark decided his *History* "would be both the history of the human heart, and the story of a people" his text was a fusion of ideas from three sources of wisdom literature: the historians of antiquity; the novelists and poets of Europe; and the novelists and poets of Australia.

The outcome is open to interrogation. It is not open to expurgation. This is to behave as rationally as the surgeon who upgraded the human body by extracting all veins so nothing would corrupt the arteries and flow of purified blood.

When some of Clark's professional colleagues advised him to quit the project, after volume I appeared in 1962, Clark bunkered down for the next twenty five years determined to tell Australians of the "gale

inside him".<sup>14</sup> Cathcart believes Australians need relief from that gale. He offers readers a calmer Clark. To achieve this Cathcart gradgrinds the text, liberating the historical data from the windy and speculative religious comment which catastrophically inflated a tidy one-volume history into a loquacious six volume eccentric discourse. So Clark becomes the "cautious, judicious and balanced" historian he dreaded. Paradoxically, in the process of reducing Clark's religious eccentricities to an absolute minimum Cathcart retains just sufficient of Clark's censure of traditional Christianity (especially Protestantism) to sustain a superficial anti-religious tone to Clark's vision of Australia. The outcome casts Clark in the role of atheist and sceptic, which is an absolute betrayal of the religious foundation of his optimism.

Whether the six volumes of Clark's *A History of Australia* survives as professional and acceptable academic history scarcely matters. They are best judged as a magisterial venture into experimental literature championing the cause of a sentimental but religious humanism as the pathway to a morally redeemed Australia.

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