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‘A gigantic confession of life’: Autobiography, ‘National Awakening’ and the Invention of Manning Clark¹

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Perhaps this is the worst deceiver of all – we make up our pasts.

— Doris Lessing

By any measure, Manning Clark (1915–91) is Australia’s most well-known and controversial historian. Born only seven weeks before Australian soldiers landed at Anzac Cove on 25 April 1915, Clark’s intellectual life was framed by the great ideological struggle of the twentieth century, which began with the Russian Revolution in 1917 and ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. By the time of his death on 23 May 1991, he had also witnessed the slow yet inexorable decline of the British connection in Australia.

As professor of Australian history at The Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, Clark produced an exceptional volume of work over a period of 40 years; three volumes of historical documents (the bedrock

1 An earlier version of the present chapter appeared in the journal *Life Writing*: “National Awakening,” Autobiography, and the Invention of Manning Clark’, *Life Writing*, 13:2 (2016), 207–20. The author and editors are grateful for permission to republish.

of university courses in Australian history for more than two decades), *A Short History of Australia* (which was translated into several European and Asian languages and sold widely overseas), an extremely controversial short book on his visit to the Soviet Union in the late 1950s – *Meeting Soviet Man* – another on the writer Henry Lawson, the ABC Boyer Lectures in 1976, a collection of essays, two volumes of short stories, hundreds of articles, reviews, newspaper op-eds and two volumes of autobiography. Five further volumes of speeches, letters, history and autobiographical writings were published posthumously. From 1938, the time of his scholarship to Oxford at age 23 until his death in 1991, Clark also kept personal diaries, documenting his inner life often with fierce and uncompromising honesty, as well as tracking the personal lives of many of his friends and colleagues in sometimes brutal fashion, all of it in his barely legible ink scrawl, a script once compared to ‘micro barbed-wire’.² In addition, he kept copious notebooks over the same period mapping his reading and the conceptual development of his work. Taken together, this output, most of it completed while he was still teaching, easily exceeded that of many of his contemporaries. And yet, remarkably, the above list of publications excludes the work for which he is best known, his six-volume *A History of Australia*, published between 1962 and 1987. Clark’s six volumes comprised well over one million words and their extraordinary popularity played a large part in keeping Melbourne University Press afloat for over two decades (selling an average of 40,000 copies per volume).³

In media interviews, Clark’s personal story of the creation of the six volumes became part of his success, as if the nation were waiting for the next instalment in the story of its own creation. In the 1970s and 1980s, he was interviewed both after each volume was published and when he had completed successive drafts. Clark’s ability to dramatise the writing process usually involved a disarming cocktail of self-deprecation and special pleading, particularly in the 1980s (‘I haven’t done everyone justice and I regret that I did not have more ability ... I know I’ve made a lot of mistakes ... I don’t want to sound too pompous. I’ve got a reputation for being a bit of a bullshit artist’).⁴ Clark created the illusion that his readers were buying both *A History of Australia* and a latter-day version of Rousseau’s *The Confessions*, a deeply personal impression of the past and

2 Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* (Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2011), 29.

3 See Appendix to this chapter for bibliographic details of Clark’s *oeuvre*.

4 Clark interviewed by Ken Brass, *Weekend Australian Magazine*, 2 March 1985.

life itself. He frequently referred to his historical writing as the 'child of his heart'. For Clark, there was no distance between the historian and the past he inhabited.

In the public eye, from his retirement in the early 1970s until his death in 1991, Clark wore his trademark dress – the slightly tattered, black three-piece suit, the watch chain dangling from the fob pocket, the long, thin legs anchored in paddock-bashing boots and the grave, goatee-bearded face of the old man crowned by a crumpled, weather-beaten Akubra. Across Australia, he was renowned as a historical oracle. At the height of his fame in the 1970s and 1980s, he was awarded a Companion of the Order of Australia (1975), named Australian of the Year (1981) and won almost every major Australian literary award. In 1988, the year of Australia's Bicentenary, Clark (and his hat) seemed to be everywhere. He was the frequent subject of cartoonists' caricatures; he penned major critical essays interpreting the historical significance of the Bicentenary for magazines such as *The Bulletin* and *Time Australia*, and was easily the nation's most prominent public intellectual. In his last years, after his retirement from teaching, Clark addressed Australia Day events and citizenship ceremonies; launched books; opened art exhibitions, fetes, music festivals, opera and theatre productions; endorsed rock bands; spoke at school speech nights, Australian Labor Party campaign rallies and church services.

To understand the many causes he fought for from the 1960s to the 1990s is to understand how instrumental his public life was in changing the face of Australia in the twentieth century. Almost two decades before the White Australia policy was dismantled, Clark called for an end to the prejudice and inhumanity inherent in racial discrimination. He opposed the Vietnam War; condemned the proliferation of nuclear weapons; supported the land rights and treaty demands of Indigenous Australians; championed the arts and the importance of teaching Australian history in schools and universities; campaigned to save the Great Barrier Reef, Fraser Island and the Franklin River; spoke against the logging of old-growth forests; lent his name to numerous petitions to save significant historical sites; backed heritage legislation; protested against the Soviet Union's incarceration of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and the repression of the Solidarity movement in Poland; enthusiastically embraced multicultural Australia; personally encouraged generations of writers and artists; and worked to challenge longstanding stereotypes of Australia abroad, especially in the United Kingdom. In the last two decades of his life, Clark appeared in

every possible media site, including midday television, house and garden programs, and even managed a cameo role as the preacher in the 1985 film production of the Peter Carey novel, *Bliss*. In all of these appearances and writings, Clark deftly cast his public interventions through the lens of his personal experience. The public telling of autobiographical stories – the modus operandi of the public intellectual – became the means through which Clark established a popular audience and created himself as a national prophet.

In the seven years I spent working on Clark's biography between 2004 and 2011, I never doubted the importance of what I was doing.⁵ To be sure, I experienced many moments of exasperation and exhaustion. To come close to Clark, to know him intimately and, at the same time to keep my distance was always a struggle. This is the biographer's dilemma: to resolve the tension between closeness and distance, to know and reveal the subject without becoming the subject's ventriloquist. Gradually, I realised that there was something that transcended even the weight of Clark's scholarship and the substantial impact of his public life. On a human level alone – as child, adolescent, lover, friend and father – his life was lived and remembered with such an acute theatrical sensibility that it spoke to readers regardless of their gender, cultural background or nationality. Clark's life contained contradictions numerous and large enough for all of us to recognise shards of our own experience. It was both Australian and universal. But it was also a life given over to public examination in a way that few of us would dare contemplate, one burdened by extreme self-consciousness and a pathological desire to be remembered as a great man. Much of Clark's archival legacy – his anguished diaries, his voluminous correspondence with others (including more than 50 years of letters to his wife Dymphna), his eulogies for departed friends and his irrepressible ministering of others at times of personal crisis – was, as Ken Inglis shrewdly remarked in 1991, more about 'self than subject'.⁶ Nearly everything Clark wrote and said was self-referential. Narrating the lives of others became a way of seeding the autobiography of C.M.H. Clark in the Australian imagination.

5 McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*.

6 The remark by Ken Inglis is drawn from a set of hastily written notes by Inglis shortly after Clark's death and given to me. The notes are still in my possession. Clark's papers are held at the National Library of Australia (NLA, MS 7550), as are those of Dymphna Clark (NLA, MS 9873).

One of the greatest challenges I encountered in writing Clark's biography was not only the question of how to deal with the work of previous biographers such as Brian Matthews and Stephen Holt, but also the far more pressing problem of how to deal with Clark's *autobiographical* writings.⁷ My intention was to write Clark's life as it was *lived*, not as he remembered it. Yet this proved tremendously difficult because he had stamped so much of his own memory on the public image of his life. To write Clark's biography, I had to somehow wrest control of the life from the extremely controlling voice of my subject. Perhaps the most graphic example of this was Clark's tendency to leave directional notes to his biographers throughout his papers. But the sheer volume of his autobiographical writings exacerbated the struggle for biographical distance. To avoid paraphrasing Clark's various accounts of his life and merely accepting his version of events, I had to disarm his autobiographical voice and test his interpretations and recollections against the perspectives of others.

Clark's best-known volumes of autobiography were published in quick succession in 1989 and 1990. First, *The Puzzles of Childhood*, which tells the story of his parents' lives and the 'nightmares and terrors' of his childhood, and then *Quest for Grace*, which picks up the story from his days as a student at the University of Melbourne and Oxford in the 1930s and ends just before the first volume of *A History of Australia* is published in 1962. In addition to these two volumes, Clark's autobiographical writings extended to reflections on historical writing (*An Historian's Apprenticeship*), essays, speeches and interviews. In fact, it is perfectly reasonable to include Clark's histories in the same category. For, as Clark remarked, 'everything one writes is a fragment in a gigantic confession of life'.⁸ He saw all of his writing as inherently autobiographical.

Both as historian and public intellectual, Clark helped to destroy the belief that Australian history was merely a dull, insignificant appendage to British imperial history. Leading much of the post-1960s public debate around 'new nationalism', he transformed popular understandings of Australian history, an achievement that will undoubtedly prove to be his most lasting contribution. The origins of Clark's *A History of Australia*

7 Stephen Holt, *Manning Clark and Australian History, 1915–1963* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1982); Holt, *A Short History of Manning Clark* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999); Brian Matthews, *Manning Clark: A Life* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008).

8 Manning Clark, 'A Long Time Ago', in his *Speaking Out of Turn: Lectures and Speeches, 1940–1991* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997), 79.

can be found in the profound schism between the established pastoral background of his pious, Protestant mother (a direct descendant of Samuel Marsden) and the working-class larrikinism of his Anglo-Catholic father of part-Irish descent, a division that Clark dramatised at every opportunity, portraying the religious divisions of his family as Australia's writ large. More than any other writer of his generation, Clark succeeded in aligning the trajectory of his own life with a larger narrative of national awakening.

His histories were *autobiographical* not only because he infused the past with his own experience but also because he often invented the thoughts and emotions of historical characters. As they rise from their graves and perform their soliloquies, they appear as thinly veiled shadows of their author's alter ego: they are 'tormented' by doubt and guilt, led on by some 'madness of the heart', and inevitably brought down by their 'fatal flaw'. Women appear in *A History of Australia* in much the same vein as Dymphna Clark appears in the pages of his diary. They are either the temptress or the punisher, more often the latter; women with a sharp, vindictive streak who undermine men's idealism and fail to understand the enormity of their husband's creative genius. In the pages of Clark's history, potted autobiographies rain down one after another, almost as if Clark were conducting an oratorio. In this light, it seems entirely appropriate that *A History of Australia* was made into a musical in 1988 (*Manning Clark's History of Australia: The Musical*). Clark's grand narrative – with its now familiar but at the time quite revolutionary schema of seeing Australia's past through the prism of three great belief systems: Protestantism, Catholicism and the Enlightenment – lurches from the inspired to the droll, finding tragedy, pathos and existential crisis on every stump and street corner. Part Gibbon, part Macaulay, part Carlyle, and steeped in the language of the Old Testament, it is entirely character driven, mostly a succession of flawed, tormented males, who walk on stage at the allotted time to play out the drama of their biographical roles. At regular intervals, the ghosts of Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov and Henry James emerge from behind the arras to provide a guiding aphorism or two. Both in everyday speech, and in the persona of the writer, Clark spoke through the voices of the canon, peppering his language with literary and biblical quotations; Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy and the Book of Ecclesiastes were among his favourite sources of inspiration.

Clark was probably the first historian in Australia to write at length about the inner life of his characters (sketches that frequently mirrored his emotional state at the time of writing). Much of the emotion in his work is grounded in an acute religiosity, the parson's son ministering the souls of Australia's flawed men – Wentworth, Lawson, Burke and Wills, John Curtin and Manning Clark. His feeling was not only for his characters, it was also for place. Until Clark's six volumes, historical melancholy was something Australians imagined resided only in the layered, built environment of Europe. Like Sidney Nolan, Patrick White and Arthur Boyd, Clark found this melancholy in the land itself, a melancholy not only of exile but one born of an awareness of the continent's antiquity and the horror of the violent dispossession of Indigenous people; a dispossession that is not so much documented in his work but rather recurs as an underlying tragic refrain. *A History of Australia* succeeded in attracting a large popular readership because of its narrative flair and Clark's mercurial ability to convince his audience that the story of his own life was a unique window onto Australian history.

A handful of critics and reviewers noted the autobiographical dimension of Clark's history. John Rickard was particularly astute on the way in which Clark increasingly relied on personal experience as the volumes progressed: 'the project which began as history', Rickard observed, 'has become autobiography'.⁹ Inglis thought fellow historians Bede Nairn and Allan Martin were both concerned that Clark had moved from history to fiction and autobiography, with each volume hanging on an encounter between an Anglophile villain (Alfred Deakin, Robert Menzies) and an Australian tragic hero (Henry Lawson, John Curtin).¹⁰ Richard White was another who observed that, in the last volumes, 'history and memory had come too close'.¹¹ Reviewing Volume Five in 1981, Edmund Campion noted that the woman seen crying out at the railway station at the end of the book was actually Clark's mother. He drew attention to the way in which Clark introduced his personal memories of Anzac Day in the 1920s and 1930s into the history, just as he did with his memories of songs, radio advertisements and the Bodyline cricket series. 'This personal note is something new in our historians', reflected Campion. 'Indeed, it is so

9 John Rickard, review of *A History of Australia*, vol. 6 by Manning Clark, *Times on Sunday*, 23 August 1987.

10 This characterisation of Nairn and Martin comes from the file of notes given to me by Ken Inglis.

11 Richard White, review of *The Quest for Grace* by Manning Clark, *Australian Society*, November 1990, 39–40.

noticeable in Manning Clark that when I first read Volume Six I thought of suggesting to Melbourne University Press that they reject it as his autobiography.¹²

Perhaps the first question regarding Manning Clark's volumes of autobiography (and all autobiography for that matter) is why he decided to write them? To defend oneself *against* biographers (as Doris Lessing described her motive for writing autobiography); to claim one's life *before* the 'ferrets' (as Kate Grenville described biographers when donating her papers to the National Library of Australia) usurp and misrepresent it; to 'set the record straight', as so many politicians claim is the starting point for their memoirs; or, as former Labor minister Barry Jones reflected when writing his autobiography *A Thinking Reed*, 'to explain my life to myself', to subject oneself to gruelling self-examination and at the same time give an existing audience a more personal insight into the object of their admiration.¹³ The very term autobiography suggests that the decision to write is self-generated. I am a significant someone, therefore I am an autobiographer. Few autobiographers find themselves at their writing desk because they want to test or reconstitute the boundaries of the genre itself. Historical context, celebrity marketing and the vagaries of the publishing industry are usually far more important determinants in the shaping and publishing of autobiography.

Clark's autobiographies, written towards the end of his life when he was already a well-known figure, were prompted initially not by the urgent need for self-examination about which he spoke so frequently in public, but much more practically by the suggestion of former Labor senator Susan Ryan, who in the late 1980s worked as an editor for Penguin after leaving politics. Ryan wrote to Clark and asked him if he would consider writing his autobiography.¹⁴ Both volumes of Clark's autobiography were therefore the direct result of his publisher's initiative. Clark received a \$5,000 advance from Penguin to write *The Puzzles of Childhood*. Ryan, who had witnessed Clark's enormous public impact firsthand during her time in parliament, recognised a commercial opportunity when she

12 Edmund Campion, 'Manning Clark', *Scripta*, 5:2 (1989), 183–7.

13 Doris Lessing, *Under my Skin: Volume One of my Autobiography* (London: HarperCollins, 1994), 14; Susan Wyndham, 'Kate Grenville's New Life as a Single Woman', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 21 March 2015, www.smh.com.au/good-weekend/kate-grenvilles-new-life-as-a-single-woman-20150304-13vbim.html; Barry Jones, *A Thinking Reed* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2006), 1.

14 Clark on Susan Ryan's invitation in his interview with Andrew Rutherford, *Sunday Age*, 14 October 1990, 11.

saw one. Within months of publication, her decision was vindicated. *The Puzzles of Childhood* won national literary awards, climbed to number one in the list of bestselling non-fiction, while Qantas Airways purchased 500 copies to distribute to their passengers on long-haul flights. Although Clark claimed to Humphrey McQueen that he was 'upset' by Penguin's marketing campaign for the book – 'books should make their own mark without aids from P.R. promoters who probably have not read the book. Penguin makes me feel what I have to say is a commodity' – he appeared to revel in the opportunity to 'confess' his life story to the media.¹⁵

The particular cultural and political context in which Clark's autobiographies were written did much to shape their voice and narrative. They were completed in the shadow of his failing health and the death of many of his closest friends ('my contemporaries, or more accurately, my near contemporaries all seem to be dying').¹⁶ These were the years that followed the constitutional crisis that had divided Australian society so deeply in 1975, when Governor-General Sir John Kerr dismissed Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam from office. As one of the leading intellectuals of the Labor Left, Clark was at the forefront of the campaign that condemned Kerr and the conservative parties and demanded a republican constitution. These were also the years of growing consumerism, increasing affluence and economic growth and rampant mining development. The tide of often vague, ill-directed nationalism that accompanied the demise of British Australia, which Clark had ridden so successfully, had helped to push Australian authors, artists and celebrities to the fore remarkably quickly. In Whitlam's Australia, intellectuals were accorded a public platform and authority they had never claimed before. Publishers were keen to capitalise on this cultural awakening and the booming genre of autobiography was no exception. The emotive style of Clark's autobiographies proved an exception to James Walter's identification of 'the dominance in Australian biography of an empiricist, positivist tradition – strictly chronological, favouring the public life over the private, description over analysis and the preservation of emotional distance – at least up until [the early 1980s]'. But, in other respects, his work was typical of broader literary and cultural trends. As Bruce Bennett noted as early as 1998, so many Australian autobiographies published in the late twentieth century, particularly those by authors such as Patrick

15 Clark to Humphrey McQueen, 7 July 1989, Papers of Humphrey McQueen, NLA, MS 4809, Folder Addition 31.5.1990, 'Correspondence with Manning Clark, 1988–1990'.

16 Clark to McQueen, 15 August 1988, in *ibid*.

White, Donald Horne and Geoffrey Dutton, sought to trace a life as 'part of a national allegory'.¹⁷ Clark's autobiographies were probably the prime example.

In *The Puzzles of Childhood*, Clark casts his first years in the harsh light of his latter-day celebrity status. Thus, from the moment of his birth, he is destined to become a national prophet. Early in the book we read his mother's words to the infant Manning: 'one day [you] will be a famous man'.¹⁸ Clark's mother's observation seems remarkably perceptive given that at this stage her son had not even begun to walk or talk. Other examples of remembering past experience through the imperatives of Clark's latter-day status as a national prophet abound. In *The Quest for Grace*, Clark continuously complains of the English condescension towards Australians that he experienced in Oxford. 'It made me very conscious of myself as an Australian.' Playing cricket for Oxford, he claimed that the English 'treated [him] as an outsider ... they didn't accept me as an ordinary human being and I've never forgotten it'.¹⁹ Yet in his diary during these years there is very little if any evidence of these sentiments. He certainly remarks on his experience of English superiority, but the young Clark is painfully aware of what he perceives to be the far more cultured existence in England. He yearns to be accepted. In fact, his depiction of his experience in England in the late 1930s in *The Quest for Grace* demonstrates how he has retrospectively coloured his memories through the prism of post-Dismissal Australia. A similar rewriting of the past can be observed in Clark's history.

The last three volumes of *A History of Australia*, all written in the wake of the Dismissal, give greater stress to Australian nationalism. The earlier schema of the grand contest between Catholicism, Protestantism and the Enlightenment falls away. In its place is the simplistic polarity of the Old Dead Tree (Britain) and the Young Tree Green (Australia). Clark's depiction of the Anglo-Australian relationship becomes increasingly crude. 'Colonials don't make their own history,' he proclaims, 'decisions are made for them in London.'²⁰ The Dismissal sharpened Clark's anti-

17 Bruce Bennett, 'Literary Culture since Vietnam: A New Dynamic', in Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss, eds, *Oxford Literary History of Australia* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1988), 255; and James Walter, quoted by Bennett, *ibid.*, 287.

18 Manning Clark, *The Puzzles of Childhood* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1989), 48.

19 Clark interviewed in *Australian Playboy*, July 1981, 31–4.

20 Glen Mitchell, 'Interview with Professor Manning Clark', *University of Wollongong Historical Journal*, 1:1 (1975), 65–75.

British sentiments. As public intellectual, historian and autobiographer, he wrote both his life story and the nation's history in the image of late twentieth-century nationalism. The purpose of Clark's life, as he told it, was to hammer the last nail in the coffin of British Australia. He appears to be born to oversee the end of Empire.

The opening page of *The Puzzles of Childhood* contains a story he first told in 1979. It is December 1919 and Clark is four years old. He is sitting on the backyard lawn of his home in Burwood. Looking up in the sky, he sees a mechanical bird soaring above. Curious, he asks his mother what it might be. She explains that the bird is the plane piloted by Keith and Ross Smith; they are on the last leg of their flight from London to Sydney. It is one of Clark's first memories, but like so many of his memories, the facts do not quite match the power of the story. In December 1919, Sir Keith and Ross Smith landed not in Sydney but in Darwin. Due to mechanical problems, their plane did not arrive in Sydney until three months later, on 14 February 1920. As the *Sydney Morning Herald* reported, it was not the first plane that Sydneysiders had set eyes on but 'the thrill came when one thought, as he gazed, this plane had come from England!' Thousands of people stood on rooftops to catch a glimpse of the plane, which was escorted by three others as it approached the city from the south. The flight path *did not* take the planes over Clark's home in Burwood, but over the city's northern suburbs. First sighted over Mascot, the Smith Brothers flew over the heads, down to the city, then north towards Mosman, before circling back over the harbour, down over Hyde Park and on to Mascot to land. Even if Clark had the date wrong, he would have needed to be on his roof at Burwood, a four-year-old boy with sure feet and a telescope, in order to see the Smiths' plane. Fundraising flights also took place in the weeks after the historic occasion – perhaps Clark had mistakenly remembered one of these flights? It is certainly possible that he did see a plane in the sky from his backyard in Burwood in February 1920, but the story as Clark tells it, this powerful opening image of his autobiography, is not about the young Clark, it is about the old Clark.

His apocryphal tale of an innocent child gazing up to the sky to see the arrival of the first flight from England to Australia is a memory tailor-made for the grand man of history. His first memory is of a historically significant event. The giant bird in the sky – the portent of war waged from the air, of the coming age of technology and globalisation – brings with it the historical forces of modernity that will shape twentieth-century Australia. Memory obediently serves the titanic public figure, lining up

family stories and national history until they seem to be one and the same journey. Like so many of Clark's stories, their telling allowed him to be present in the past. He became the witness, already the historian at only four years of age. The final effect was to make the path he chose to follow appear as his inevitable destiny.

More than twenty-five years after Clark's death, it is also possible to see that Clark's autobiographies rest on a pillar of falsehoods and half-truths. Perhaps it is commonplace to observe that 'autobiographies tell more lies than all but the most self-indulgent fiction'.²¹ The late Gunter Grass, no stranger to autobiographical fiction himself, reflected that in autobiography, 'the conventions of literary reminiscence and historical recollection are flawed'. Autobiographical truth, Grass insisted, 'all too easily gives way to the old literary lies. The past is elusive, memory plays tricks, the self of narrative is a stranger to the self who writes'.²² The fictive quality of autobiography has long been established. But Clark's autobiographical writings point not only to the notorious unreliability of autobiography, resting as it does on the paper-thin house of memory, but to much larger questions, such as the relationship between autobiographical truth and celebrity status and the autobiographer's right to 'own' their life story. There is a wonderfully revealing moment in an Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) radio interview conducted after the publication of *The Puzzles of Childhood* in 1989. Interviewing Clark, ABC journalist Terry Lane was perplexed by his uncanny ability in the book to know precisely what his father and mother were thinking and feeling at any given point in time, not to mention his astonishing recall of the thoughts and emotions of his childhood self. 'But how can you possibly know these things?', Lane asked Clark incredulously. Slightly unnerved, Manning replied: 'Well Terry, it's my view of my life and my view can't be wrong'. Clark's deadpan response put a swift end to Lane's line of questioning.²³

Yet it also raised a crucial question for biographers and readers: to what extent can the autobiographer's interpretation and recollection of his life be challenged? Can the biographer know his subject's life better than the subject knows himself? 'There is your life as you know it and also as others

21 A.S. Byatt, quoted in Allan Massie, 'Writing of, or from, Yourself', *Spectator*, 27 January 2010, www.spectator.co.uk/2010/01/writing-of-or-from-yourself/.

22 Ian Brunskill, 'An Added Ingredient', review of *Beim Hauten der Zwiebel* by Gunter Grass, *Times Literary Supplement*, 27 September 2006, 3–4.

23 'Terry Lane Talks with Manning Clark', ABC Spoken Word Cassette, 1990 (copy in Manning Clark House, Canberra).

know it,' wrote James Salter in his memoir *Burning the Days*, 'it is difficult to realise that you are observed from a number of points and that the sum of them has validity.'²⁴ It was precisely this perspective that Clark rejected. He claimed sole authority to interpret his life. But the autobiographer's recollection of his life can indeed be shown to be wrong. Because so much of Clark's life was lived on the public record, and because he archived his diaries and correspondence so meticulously, it is possible to test many of the claims that he makes in his autobiographies. In fact, the issue of autobiographical truth is crucial in understanding Clark's role in late twentieth-century Australia. As Salter further reflected when explaining his methods of recollection in his memoir:

What I have done is to write about people and events that were important to me, and to be truthful though relying, in one place or another, on mere memory. *Your language is your country* Leautaud said, but memory is also, as well as being a measure, in its imprint, of the value of things. I suppose it could be just as convincingly argued that the opposite is true, that what one chooses to forget is equally revealing.²⁵

Clark concurred with Salter in so far as he relied on what Virginia Woolf described as 'moments of being' – recollections that were deeply inscribed in his memory precisely because of their self-revelatory nature.²⁶ He did not want to write an autobiography that resembled his impression of Kaplan's biography of Dickens, 'one of those American academic biographies which tells you what he had for breakfast but not what you want to know'.²⁷ If memory was to be employed then it was not an instrument of reference so much as an instrument of self-discovery.²⁸ Yet Clark also conspicuously failed to take account of the possibility that what he had misremembered, invented, exaggerated or repressed was potentially more revealing than all of the words set down in his autobiographies. 'What I was trying to do', Clark explained, 'was to draw a picture of memory ... a portrait of the inside of my head.'²⁹ However, his claim to have relied mostly on memory in writing his autobiography is only partially true. Indeed, the evidence

24 James Salter, *Burning the Days* (New York: Vintage, 1997), 4.

25 *Ibid.*, xi.

26 Hermione Woolf, *Moments of Being: Autobiographical Writings*, introduced by Hermione Lee (London: Pimlico, 2002).

27 Clark to McQueen, 30 April 1989, McQueen Papers, NLA, MS 4809, Folder Addition 31.5.1990.

28 On this distinction, see Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: John Calder, 1999; first published in 1965), 29.

29 Clark interviewed by Peter Craven, *Sunday Herald*, 8 October 1989, 42.

in Clark's papers shows that he wrote his autobiographies in the same way that he wrote his history, as a series of character sketches interspersed with personal recollections, a performer improvising from primary sources and a mystic led through life by a series of epiphanies. Far from relying on memory alone, Clark carried out extensive research, especially for *The Puzzles of Childhood*. He wrote to various churches and historical societies seeking information on his parents' lives. He copied documents relating to his ancestors such as Samuel Marsden. He sourced newspaper articles and local histories to provide historical context. And he made an attempt to read reflections on autobiography by writers such as Michael Holroyd.

Nor was he the only researcher. Dymphna carried out most of his research. The archives are full of copious notes in her handwriting. She corrected grammar and punctuation, she suggested rephrasing and she corrected dates, places and memories. As Clark's editor, some of her marginal comments are telling:

did you or did you not know where you stood? ...

Was it at Port Jackson (not Botany Bay) that the Aborigines told the British to go away? ...

She needs to be identified – wife or flame? ... she has been doing it off and on for 140 pages! ...

Do you think it tactful to talk about [your brother's] generosity to 'those more gifted' [like yourself]? What about 'to those with gifts different from his own'

Poor you, trapped in this terrible heart-dimming straitening institution, for all these years, pitiful, come on now!

After 50 years of marriage, Dymphna was clearly exasperated by the self-serving nature of Clark's recollections. For her, the lack of truthfulness in Clark's autobiographies undermined their claims to authenticity and their pretensions to literary greatness. For Clark, although he seemed to remain blissfully unaware of his tendency to self-aggrandise, he was nonetheless painfully conscious of his tendency to omit certain details and events in telling the story of his life.³⁰

30 Dymphna's comments can be found in the Manning Clark Papers, MS 7550, Series 25, Box 173, 'Correspondence and drafts relating to Quest for Grace'. The first folder includes her handwritten editing notes.

As he wrote both volumes of autobiography throughout the late 1980s, Clark frequently exhorted himself to tell the truth about his life. 'How to be truthful without exposing one's own swinishness', he wrote searchingly, and 'how to be honest without offending someone?'³¹ Despite his many promises to friends such as Humphrey McQueen that he would not recoil from writing an unvarnished account of his life ('Is the non-truth worth the paper on which it is written? I believe passionately we should all face the truth about ourselves'), the pages of his diary reveal his guilt and self-loathing because of his failure to do so.³² On 11 March 1988, as he was beginning to write *The Puzzles of Childhood*, he wallowed in self-pity and disillusionment:

Last night in bed had an attack of angina. I know my travelling and lecturing are killing me, but, maybe, that is what I want, the pain of living is now so intense. My wife is still taking revenge on me for my past iniquities. My closest friend, the one in whom I placed complete trust, has deserted me in my hour of need, the attacks on my work and character continue and will probably go on for a while after I am dead. I have lost faith in the autobiography.³³

By the time both volumes of autobiography were published in 1990, Clark was firmly convinced that he had failed the task of self-examination that he had set for himself:

The two volumes of the autobiography suffer from my failure to address myself to three subjects which have caused me much pain and made me the instrument of pain to other people. They are – First – my infidelities to Dymphna, infidelities of the heart more than the body, and my failure to examine when and why they began. I remember in the beginning my fear of whether I could keep her individual love, or whether she ever loved me. Second, my corruption of other people ... my [name deleted] who became a drunk just as I was wiping the filth of the gutter off my body. I made a drunkard seem attractive to him ... Third, those volumes do not confess to another fatal flaw ... inwardly I go to pieces when criticised, can never speak again to the character sketchers or critics who list the errors in my work. I never forget and never forgive. I do not retaliate, I punish them with silence and do not speak to them again ... a curt nod, a blank face, a horrible face ... cutting them, avoiding them. I have not

31 Ibid.: Clark's notes to self on first draft of *The Quest for Grace*.

32 Clark to McQueen, 28 July 1988, McQueen Papers, NLA, MS 4809, Folder Addition 31.5.1990.

33 Manning Clark, Diary, 11 March 1988, NLA, MS 7550, Series 2.

really tried to change, but I doubt whether I could change, that rush of blood to the head floods the rational me. I shake inwardly ... there has been no improvement except in surface courtesy.³⁴

These reflections scribbled hastily in Clark's diary appear far closer to the truth. They demonstrate a capacity for self-criticism that his autobiographies conspicuously lack. As did one particularly frank note that Clark left for his biographer in his papers. In a folder marked 'Illustrations' for *The Quest for Grace*, there is a handwritten list in ink of the photographs and the order they appeared in the book. They are numbered with the captions from 1 to 10. Then, a line is drawn at the bottom of the list, in what appears to be fresher ink than the list above, almost certainly added at a later time, most probably as Clark pored over his papers in the last months of his life leaving comments for those he knew would come to his papers after his death. Underneath the line drawn earlier he wrote in fresh ink: 'The photographs, like the book, say nothing – the book is a lie, as it says nothing of what I lived through'.³⁵ Clark sets up a conversation with the biographer whom he knows will come sniffing like a bloodhound to the archive he has constructed. He plays with his own truth, giving prominence to earnest descriptions of his virtues on the one hand, while at the same time suggesting that the whole edifice of his self-invention is nothing but a charade, as if he does not know the truth himself.

Combing through Clark's autobiographies and finding examples of factual errors or misremembered encounters is a pastime one could indulge in for many years. In the pages of *The Puzzles of Childhood* and *The Quest for Grace* things happen that never took place. People are born before their time. They die six years too early or four years too late. They stand for Labor Party preselection when they never did and they are remembered for doing all manner of things that never occurred. Consistent with Inglis's observation that Clark's recollections of others were often more about 'self than subject', his portrayal of many characters serves merely as a vehicle for dispensing praise to himself. And, of course, Clark's memories of his parents differ from those of his siblings, both of whom stated after the publication of *The Puzzles of Childhood* that they could not recognise their parents' marriage in his agonised portrayal, just as his accounts of events

34 Ibid., 13 March 1990.

35 Manning Clark Papers, NLA, MS 7550, Series 25, Box 175, Folder, 'Illustrations for Quest for Grace'.

and friendships differ from the memories of others, some of whom wrote forcefully to tell him how disappointed they were in his recollections. These differences of memory and perspectives are not unusual. And catching Clark out is not my purpose. But a handful of Clark's untruths and fabrications go to the heart of his credibility as a historian.

The most notorious example that I discovered of Clark's misremembering – his claim to have been present in Bonn the morning after *Kristallnacht* in November 1938, one repeated frequently in public during the last years of his life – still unsettles me because so much of the circumstantial evidence suggests that he knowingly lied. It was Dymphna who was in Bonn the morning after *Kristallnacht*. She wrote to Clark, who was then in Oxford and would not arrive in Bonn until three weeks later. It was her memories of *Kristallnacht* that Clark largely appropriated in order to claim a greater role for himself in one of European history's darkest moments. Clark had actually omitted the story of his presence that November morning in Bonn from all the drafts of *The Quest for Grace* that Dymphna edited before the book's publication. Not until the final typescript draft, when he finally decided on the title and Dymphna's editing was complete, did he decide to insert the claim that he was present in Bonn and that he had indeed seen the smashed glass from the Jewish shop windows on the streets and watched as the smoke from the burning synagogues filled the sky. It was not until the book was published that Dymphna read Clark's last-minute insertion, although she had certainly heard him make the claim previously on radio and television. It is possible that Clark chose to wait until the final draft to insert the claim of his presence the morning after *Kristallnacht* so as to avoid her marking up his claim as false. As she acknowledged after Clark's death in a private interview, '[Manning] says he arrived the morning after *Kristallnacht*. That's not true'.³⁶

Writing about their peers, mentors and influences, let alone their achievements, historians are adept at making the activities of their own kind appear momentous. Nonetheless, Clark's autobiographies do so to a far greater extent than those of most of his peers. He saw himself as the leader of an intellectual vanguard whose self-appointed responsibility was to lead Australia out of its Anglo-centric torpor towards an independent, republican, multicultural and more Indigenous-centred future, a completely new vision of the nation. However, this is not to suggest

36 Quoted in McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, 638.

that many of his pronouncements were not prescient. In 1981, when he was asked to name Australia's national day, Clark argued that the country had yet to agree on one. He pointed out that Indigenous Australians were absent from the national anthem and invisible in the national flag and constitution. 'Our national day in the future,' he said, 'will be that day in which we made the great step forward on the Aborigines and on the non-British descendants and on [the] question of what sort of society are we going to have in Australia.'³⁷

Janet Malcolm has written that '[i]f an autobiography is to be even minimally readable, the autobiographer must step in and subdue what you could call memory's autism, its passion for the tedious. He must not be afraid to invent. Above all he must invent himself'.³⁸ Manning Clark heeded Malcolm's advice. His autobiographies were an attempt to adapt his life story to the needs of Australia at Empire's end. His recollections are always pointing to the future, his authorial voice always pleading for entrance to Valhalla. Clark's autobiographies provided the great man's origin story and they further invented him as a national prophet, the man who would lead Australia out of the wilderness of what he called 'British philistinism' towards a largely unknown and ill-defined but somehow more enlightened Australian future. Towards the end of his life, he sensed that the way in which he had framed this quest – the old dead tree versus the young tree green – was quickly becoming irrelevant. 'The problems of my generation, or the way I formulated them have passed away – maybe are [already] rotting in history's ample rubbish bin.'³⁹ Like so many of his intellectual contemporaries, Clark was also alienated from the nation he sought to advance. He told McQueen that he had grown tired of living in 'a country inhabited by a people who display a vast indifference to what matters in life – and an unwillingness to listen to what you have to say'.⁴⁰ This seems a strange comment coming from someone who was listened to more than any other intellectual in late twentieth-century Australia. No matter how much of a national figure Clark became, he still craved to be showered in even greater public acclaim. As he wrote to Humphrey McQueen in 1984, 'On Tuesday 22 January at 4pm

37 Clark interviewed by Alan Tate, *The Virgin Press*, October–November 1981, 20.

38 Janet Malcolm, 'Thoughts on Autobiography from an Abandoned Autobiography', in her *Forty-one False Starts: Essays on Artists and Writers* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2013), 297–8.

39 Clark to McQueen, 24 April 1989, McQueen Papers, NLA, MS 4809, Folder Addition 31.5.1990.

40 Clark to McQueen, 12 March 1990, in *ibid.*

a BRONZE BUST of me will be unveiled in the Chifley Library. My LITERARY SLANDERERS will not be there. My friends will be. Please come if you can'.⁴¹

In the last weeks of Clark's life it was rumoured that he was writing a third volume of autobiography. A rough draft clearly existed, as his diaries appear to indicate. Ian Hancock, Clark's former colleague at ANU, recalled that the departmental secretary was 'shocked' as she typed up the first pages of the manuscript. 'She was shaking when she told me about it. It was full of scandalous revelations. But I think Dymphna put her foot down and refused to allow its publication.'⁴² Perhaps Clark had finally decided to abide by his many exhortations to bare all. But no such manuscript has survived in his papers.

In early 1990, convinced that his death was now 'only a year or so away', Clark looked again to posterity when he penned the final line of his last letter to Humphrey McQueen before McQueen left Japan for Australia:

[I] have tried, but alas failed to recreate the experience in [*The Quest for Grace*] of the confessions of a great sinner, & a failed human being ... This ends the Clark part of the Clark-McQueen correspondence. I enjoyed it. You have always been very good to me. My love to you, Ever, Manning.⁴³

In the months ahead, Clark read the reviews of *Quest* in the literary pages of the broadsheet press, which, as with most of his later work, shifted dramatically from almost foolish adulation to snarling condemnation. Friend and fellow historian Noel McLachlan claimed that Clark had produced 'the first Australian intellectual biography', one 'as revelatory as Rousseau's but better', in which 'astonishingly little seems to be held back', while Andrew Riemer politely referred to Clark's 'parochialism' in which Clark presents 'the world seen from Melbourne', riding forth 'like a latter-day Quixote, tilting at windmills perhaps, but keeping alive the noble flame of his idealism'.⁴⁴ Richard White, however, had come closest to revealing Clark's literary conceit: 'Manning Clark's Australia is Manning Clark himself'.⁴⁵

41 Clark to McQueen, 19 January 1984, in *ibid.*

42 Ian Hancock to author, May 2007.

43 Clark to McQueen, 12 March 1990, McQueen Papers, NLA, MS 4809, Folder Addition 31.5.1990.

44 McLachlan's review in *The Australian Magazine*, 20–21 October 1990; Riemer in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 October 1990.

45 White, review of *The Quest for Grace*.

Clark's autobiographies – clearly unreliable, undeniably self-indulgent and yet somehow strangely compelling despite their countless literary flaws – stand not only as allegories of national awakening but also as the final expression of Clark's fictive historical style. For Manning Clark, it was not the facts of history that shaped us but the impression – emotional, intellectual and spiritual – that the telling of history and one's life story left behind. As he told *Playboy* magazine in 1989: 'I remember very vividly that one of my boyhood roles at school, both the state school and at Melbourne Grammar, was the telling of stories. I don't mean fibs of course, but I was a storyteller.'⁴⁶

Appendix: Clark's books

There were many reprintings and subsequent editions of Clark's works.

Only the first editions have been itemised.

A History of Australia

Vol. 1. *From the Earliest Times to the Age of Macquarie*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1962.

Vol. 2. *New South Wales and Van Dieman's Land, 1822–1838*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1968.

Vol. 3. *The Beginning of an Australian Civilisation, 1824–1851*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1973.

Vol. 4. *The Earth Abideth for Ever, 1851–1888*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1978.

Vol. 5. *The People Make Laws, 1980–1915*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1981.

Vol. 6. *The Old Dead Tree and the Young Tree Green, 1916–1935*. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1987.

46 Clark interviewed by *Australian Playboy*, July 1981, 31–4.

Short history

A Short History of Australia. New York: New American Library, 1963.

Other monographs (during his lifetime)

Meeting Soviet Man. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1960.

The Discovery of Australia: 1976 Boyer Lectures. Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1976.

In Search of Henry Lawson. Melbourne: Macmillan, 1978.

Books of documents

Select Documents in Australian History, 1788–1850. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1950.

Select Documents in Australian History, 1851–1900. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1955.

Sources of Australian History. London: Oxford University Press, 1957.

Edited volume

Making History, with an 'Introduction' by Stuart Macintyre and other chapters by R.M. Crawford and Geoffrey Blainey. Melbourne/Ringwood: McPhee Gribble/Penguin Books, 1984.

Collection of essays

Occasional Writings and Speeches. Melbourne: Fontana/Collins, 1980.

Scholarly pamphlets

Abel Tasman. Melbourne: Oxford University Press [in the 'Australian Explorers' series], 1959.

The Quest for an Australian Identity. Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1980 [James Dulig Memorial Lecture].

Children's history

The Ashton Scholastic History of Australia, by Manning Clark, Meredith Hooper and Susanne Ferrier. Sydney: Ashton Scholastic, 1988.

Autobiographies (during his lifetime)

The Puzzles of Childhood. Ringwood: Viking, 1989.

The Quest for Grace. Ringwood: Viking, 1990.

Short stories

Disquiet and Other Stories. Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969.

Manning Clark: Collected Short Stories. Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1986.

Posthumous

A Historian's Apprenticeship. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1992.

Manning Clark's History of Australia, abridged by Michael Cathcart. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1993.

Dear Kathleen, Dear Manning: The Correspondence of Manning Clark and Kathleen Fitzpatrick, 1949–1990. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1996.

Speaking out of Turn: Lectures and Speeches, 1940–1991. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1997.

The Ideal of Alexis de Tocqueville, ed. Dymphna Clark, David Headon and John Williams. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2000.

Manning Clark on Gallipoli. Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2005.

Ever, Manning: Selected Letters of Manning Clark, 1938–1991, ed. Roslyn Russell. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008.

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