
In 2016, I was one of a fortunate group of scholars who travelled to the Greek island of Hydra, to participate in a conference hosted by Paul Genoni and Tanya Dalziell. We gathered at the Bratsera Hotel, a renovated sponge factory located a short walk from the ferry terminal. After the fumes and noisy chaos of Athens the peace of carless Hydra with its pristine turquoise seas and mountain views was magnificent. The summer tourists were gone and we had the hotel to ourselves. Our group of scholars and writers, including Susan Johnson and Meaghan Delahunt, were entertained in the courtyard of the house that once belonged to George Johnston and Charmian Clift, a few streets up the hill from our lodgings, not far from the famous Douskos Taverna. A young Greek couple screened a documentary they had made about the two Australian writers who had made Hydra their home for nine years, as we sat outside under the grapevines in the evening. The Johnston–Clift house is almost unchanged since the 1960s but is now worth millions of euros. Hydra is close enough to Athens for daytrips and its proximity makes it highly attractive for wealthy Athenians as a weekend escape. There is not much to remind the visitor of the Australian writers, however, except that a few local people remember them, and it was a privilege to listen to their recollections at the conference. In fact, Leonard Cohen’s residency on the island, at the same time as Clift and Johnston, has eclipsed that of the Australians, with many a tourist climbing the steep hill through the labyrinth of alleyways in order to get a glimpse of the house in which Cohen wrote two of his books and lived with Marianne Ihlen.

Dalziell and Genoni have spent some five years or more researching the lives and work of the artists who lived on Hydra between 1955 and 1964. *Half the Perfect World* is that rare thing: a collective biography about a group of writers, painters, musicians and ‘drifters’ who accidentally congregated together on the island at a time when the rents were exceptionally low and the island was only just beginning to be discovered by tourists. This study of a disparate group of individuals and their struggles to create art on Hydra, connect with the locals and make lives for themselves and their families offers a major contribution to biography, Australian literary studies and modernist studies. It is a book that is not easily classified because of its wide-ranging subjects. It documents the work of many artists in a constellation around Clift and Johnston, who were central figures in the expatriate community. While Dalziell and
Genoni clearly acknowledge the attractions of Hydra, with its soaring cliffs, azure Aegean seas, golden summers and intriguing architecture, the tone of their analysis is decidedly unromantic, realistic and unsentimental. They convey the realities of living in a small, remote place that was extremely poor, where most food had to be brought in by boat and where there were chronic water shortages. The winters were harsh, there were few indoor toilets and no heating in the ancient stone houses. Athens was a slow ferry ride away, taking at least four hours each way. The island is still troubled by water shortage problems, the need to import much of the food and major waste issues. These difficulties have curbed the rampant development that has occurred on other islands but not entirely.

The title of the book comes from Cohen and Anjani Thomas’s song of appreciation for Hydra, with its ‘milky’ atmosphere, its glow described in the image of ‘the polished hill’. For them the beauty and sensuality is ‘transparent, weightless, luminous’. Johnston and Clift are the central figures of this book; their experiences, hardships, creative compromises, inspirations and aspirations—indeed their intense struggle for independence and success as writers—drive the narrative of this book. Much is already known about both Clift and Johnston but the strength of this study is that they are rendered here from other people’s viewpoints, from the observations of other key subjects of the book as well as from their own points of view in their own writing. In this, Genoni and Dalziell have achieved an evenness and refreshing originality of approach to the lives of two iconic Australian writers. Their actual experiences are refracted through the writing of the New Zealand novelist Redmond ‘Bim’ Wallis. This means that the attitudes held by Clift and Johnston come to us through their fictional counterparts; for example, in quoted passages from Wallis’s manuscript for his book, ‘The Unyielding Memory’. We cannot know therefore their veracity. Genoni and Dalziell concede that the views might be ‘complete fiction’, but express their conviction that they are more likely to be verbatim (p. 349) in the case of a response to Cohen’s success in 1961 with his book *The Spice-Box of Earth*. Clift expresses some distaste for Cohen’s acceptance of government funding. The discussion of views conveyed through fiction written by others reveals the tensions, disappointments and entanglements of the various Hydra artists and highlights the way in which writers live—through their work. This makes the sifting, interpreting and comparing of source materials all the more impressive on the part of Genoni and Dalziell in this book.

Throughout this study the authors allude frequently to the difficulties in the relationship between Clift and Johnston due to their own creative frustrations as writers, Johnston’s drive to provide for his expanding family, his health problems, Clift’s affairs and her excessive drinking. Genoni and Dalziell give credence to the commonly held view that Clift’s depression upon returning to Sydney after the years away was largely caused by her dread of the ‘impending publication of *Clean Straw for Nothing*, which Clift knew would once again lay bare her island infidelities,
which led her to take her own life’ (p. 404). The authors do not shy away from concluding that the writers’ lives were ‘semi-fulfilled and wastefully truncated’ (p. 404). In the light of the fact that their daughter Shane took her own life at the age of 25 in 1974 and that their older son Martin died young of ‘severe alcoholism’, they conclude bleakly that ‘even the best and most-lasting writing is of little account’. They refer to the ‘slow and inevitable tragedy of the two lives’ (p. 404) as one way of viewing the lives in hindsight.

It is important to note, however, that the book positions the two authors historically and geographically as part of a group who set out to escape their own societies and discover a different way of living, away from dreary London and the confines of conservative Melbourne. The book charts the formation of a community and its eventual demise through accounts of the personalities who inhabited it. The captivating accounts of the motivations, experiences, dalliances and achievements of the likes of Cohen, Axel Jensen, Marianne Ihlen, Redmond and Robyn Wallis, Rodney Hall, Sidney and Cynthia Nolan, to name only a sample of those included in the book, are particularly rich and engaging. The book reveals much coming and going among the expatriates and it is a complex story in that regard, with each protagonist attempting to keep a connection with metropolitan centres in order to publish or exhibit his or her work created on Hydra. Throughout the book we are reminded of Johnston and Clift’s alternating revulsion and fascination with tourists to their island: in Clift’s words, ‘Europe-sick boys … who yearn for the Europe of Gertrude Stein and Scott Fitzgerald’ (p. 116). Genoni and Dalziell briefly position the two Australian writers who travelled to London after the war in relation to the other expatriates who did the same, recognising that they had left what might have been a supportive intellectual community behind in London and ‘put everything on the line to settle on Hydra’ (p. 117).

If I have one minor criticism of this book, it is that the authors do not engage with scholarship on cultural expatriation that is of relevance to the Hydra venture.¹ The breadth of their research on so many subjects and the rambling stories in the book make for a rich reading experience but there is a reluctance to frame this adventure in relation to other scholarship, and that is a shortcoming. The authors do not acknowledge the continuing interest in Hydra specifically and Greece more generally among the following generations of Australian authors. At times, therefore, the book feels as if it is marooned on an island of detail remote from its connections to context and legacy. Having said that, the strength of the book is in the detailed documenting of the Hydra community and its artistic striving, human complexity

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and internationalist elements. Again however, there is a curiously apolitical quality to the analysis that leaves many questions unanswered, and that could have possibly been grounded through some discussion of scholarship on the topic.

The enabling activities of ‘insider’ figures on Hydra enliven the story and round out the narrative. Demetri and Carolyn Gassoumis are two interesting figures portrayed in the book. Demetri was a Greek-American painter who lived on Hydra with his American wife for some years, lending money to Redmond and Robyn Wallis and convincing them to stay on the island. The chapter in which Genoni and Dalziell document the controversial construction of the first swimming pool on the island by the Gassoumis couple is one of the most amusing in the book, because of its reflections on the couple’s irresistible impulse to make their residence as comfortable as anything in California, and all that this implied for the island residents who were aghast at the expense and rightfully fearful of the implications for water consumption.

Another of these ‘insiders’ was the wealthy modernist painter Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika, whose family mansion on Hydra offered a focal point for many visitors, and a home for Sidney and Cynthia Nolan over some months in 1955–56. Earlier on, Ghika had hosted Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, Norman Mailer, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Walter Gropius at his house. George and Sidney were friends, but we learn of some tension between their wives, Charmian and Cynthia, explained by the authors as generated by Clift’s fear that she may become like Cynthia, giving up her own work in service of her talented husband (p. 171).

*Half the Perfect World* rediscovers photographic treasures from the archive of photographer James Burke who also stayed at the Ghika mansion in 1960 (the house burnt down somewhat mysteriously in 1961). The other houses of Hydra’s wealthy became an object of Clift’s fascination described in *Peel Me a Lotus* and some of her comments are quoted in the chapter entitled ‘Archontika’, in which Genoni and Dalziell explain the significance of the home of Katerina Paouri to the social scene on the island. One of Burke’s photographs shows Paouri seated serenely in her living room with its grand mirrors, antique furniture and carved fireplace. Burke took a series of photographs of social gatherings on the terrace of Paouri’s house and the descriptions that accompany these images reveal a formality and propriety at her parties, as well as her association with a range of artists, including Marc Chagall. These social occasions contrast the abandon of the afternoons at Katsikas kafenio where alcohol flowed and arguments raged. It was Martin Johnston who many years later mournfully recalled his parents’ habit of spending their mornings working and afternoons ‘getting pissed’, and its effect on his life.

Burke’s photographs of an evening at Douskos Taverna are perhaps his best-known ones: there were 18 ‘foreigners’ dining and listening to Cohen singing and playing the guitar on that occasion in October 1960. Burke himself is a subject of this book as
well as the key creator of so many of its photographs (some striking photographs by Wallis are also included). Johnston and Burke met in 1944 in China where Johnston was working as a war correspondent during the Sino-Japanese War. Genoni and Dalziell explain that Burke was operating a ‘listening post’ behind Japanese lines for the Americans, and later worked for a US magazine called *Liberty*. The two men took a long trek together through Tibet in 1945. The authors document Burke’s career as a photojournalist and his interest in the abstract impressionist painters and Beat poets in New York, as well as his friendship with Johnston. It was an assignment for LIFE magazine that brought him to Hydra officially after he visited Clift and Johnston earlier in 1960. Burke described the atmosphere on Hydra to his editor as ‘fairly beat, with bearded barefoot types lounging about waterfront tables drinking ouzo’ (p. 117). Burke also recognised Johnston as the ‘leader’ of the permanent artists’ colony, conveying his sense of the group as unusual, radical and carefree, in order to convince his boss of the merits of a major photo assignment on the Greek island. Burke took 1,500 photographs of the figures portrayed in the book but they were not published. They are a major resource for this book and offer insight, authenticity, aesthetic counterpoint and a wealth of documentary weight to this study.

*Half the Perfect World* is a striking work of scholarship that is carefully detailed in its analysis of the work of artists on Hydra at a specific moment of mid-century transition and change. It contributes substantially to an understanding of modern literary life and its artistic contexts and conditions. One of the ironies of the lives of Johnston and Clift is that they longed, for years, for success as writers of literary work, and eventually left Hydra when Johnston was on the brink of achieving it with his best-known novel, *My Brother Jack*. He won the Miles Franklin Prize for the novel. Clift wrote the screenplay for the brilliant television adaptation of the book that featured the actor Nick Tate as Davy Meredith, in 1965. After 14 years away, the writers returned to Australia and Johnston achieved the acclaim and respect he had always wanted. Clift, on the other hand, remained something of an ‘outsider’ in Sydney, and did not receive the attention for her work that she had always desired. *Half the Perfect World* brings the lives of these two Australians into new perspective, illuminating their daring adventure in Greece with sensitivity and clarity, exploring the context of sociability and expatriatism in relation to their artistic endeavours and those of so many other interesting figures of the twentieth century.
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