

# 3

## Criticisms, Reaction and Counter-Reaction

It is not so much that Ryan damages our sense of Manning the man as that he strives so spiritedly to do so.

Peter Craven (1994)<sup>1</sup>

Today you cast the pebble[,] tomorrow comes the ripple.

Dymphna Clark (1960)<sup>2</sup>

Nearing the end of their 25-year professional relationship, when making the final revisions to his final volume of *A History of Australia*, Manning Clark wrote to Peter Ryan in heartfelt terms, thanking him ‘for all you have done. No words of mine could ever do justice of my debt to you. But I will try to say something’. To which Ryan responded:

As to ‘thanks’—in the first place, as far as I’m concerned, they are not needed, and would embarrass me. I did nothing beyond what a publisher ought to have done; but may I say, just between us, it *has* been my amazing good fortune to have been associated with such a project, and to have it span virtually my entire time at MUP.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 Peter Craven, ‘The Ryan Affair’, in Carl Bridge (ed.), *Manning Clark: Essays in his Place in History*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press (hereafter MUP), 1994, pp. 165–87, 224, specifically p. 172.

2 Quoted in Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2011, p. 409.

3 Clark to Ryan, 9 January 1987, and Ryan to Clark, 13 January 1987, Records of Melbourne University Press (hereafter MUP Records), 2003.0129, Unit 21 (vol. 6).

When Ryan reversed the favour eight years later, in the September 1993 issue of *Quadrant*, he unveiled Clark as a charlatan, a poseur and a dreadful mistake as a human being, whilst the epic six-volume *A History of Australia* was condemned as being sloppy, appallingly written and pernicious. The timing of Ryan's attack was as important as the content given the highly politicised atmosphere of 1993. The Australia's History Wars were in full swing with issues of republicanism and Aboriginal reconciliation at the forefront of debate. Clark had spoken forcefully in the affirmative in both matters. Another site of the History Wars controversy, in which Clark was also prominent, was the view that the European settlement of Australia was a shameful business, especially in the displacement and subsequent treatment of the Indigenous population. Others begged to differ, asserting that Australia had a history to be proud of. Only a month earlier, Geoffrey Blainey's Latham Lecture had been published in *Quadrant*, where Clark's *History* was identified as the principal propagator of 'black-armband' depictions of Australian history, in opposition to what he described as the 'three-cheers' school of history.<sup>4</sup>

\* \* \*

Ryan's attack on Clark gained immediate traction in the daily press, starting with the Melbourne *Age* running a brief front-page story on 27 September 1993.<sup>5</sup> There was a prompt and mostly angry reaction. The Clark family was shocked and Manning's widow Dymphna issued a media statement in which she described Ryan's article as a 'cantankerous piece', whilst acknowledging her gratitude for his work as Manning's publisher. Otherwise, she was content to leave her late husband's work to 'speak for itself'.<sup>6</sup> Although praised for her dignity under fire, she

4 Geoffrey Blainey, 'Drawing up a Balance Sheet of Our History', *Quadrant*, vol. 37, nos 7–8, July–August 1993, pp. 10–15. Detailed discussions of black-armband history are: Mark McKenna, *Different Perspectives on Black Armband History*, Canberra: Department of the Parliamentary Library, 1997, available at: [www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/RP9798/98RP05](http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/RP9798/98RP05); Anna Clark, 'History in Black and White: A Critical Analysis of the Black Armband Debate', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 26, no. 75, 2002, pp. 1–11 (text), 174–76 (notes), doi.org/10.1080/14443050209387797.

5 Louise Carbines, 'Publisher pays out on Manning Clark "fairy floss"', *Age*, 26 August 1993, p. 1; Carbines, 'Manning Clark's publisher wishes he wasn't', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 August 1993, p. 3; Lisa Clauden, 'Publisher ridicules Manning Clark work', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 27 August 1993, p. 5.

6 Robert Hefner, 'Publisher's outburst on Clark is no surprise, says widow', *Canberra Times*, 27 August 1993, pp. 1–2; Margaret Easterbrook, 'Clark's widow to let the History speak for itself', *Age*, 27 August 1993, p. 1; Cameron Forbes, 'Manning's widow turns the other cheek', *Australian*, 27 August 1993, p. 1; 'Widow defends historian', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1993, p. 2. The media release is in the Dymphna Clark Papers, National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA), MS 9873, Series 10, Box 35, Folder 1.

was in fact deeply hurt by what she described as Ryan's 'brazen malice'.<sup>7</sup> The extent of her pain was conveyed to me by her historian friends Ann Moyal and Roslyn Russell, with the latter confirming Dymphna's 'anguish ... and her extreme disappointment in a man whose company she had always enjoyed'.<sup>8</sup> Three years later her sense of hurt was still palpable. When asked by an interviewer whether she was surprised by Ryan's article, Dymphna replied, 'Well of course, how could you possibly expect anything like that? You've read it, have[n't] you? I've only read it once and I'm not going to read it again'.<sup>9</sup>

The Ryan onslaught had the additional effect of making Dymphna increasingly touchy about criticism of her late husband's oeuvre and she reacted with uncharacteristic asperity to a thoughtful newspaper review (of the abridged edition of the *History*). It was written by Monash University historian John Rickard, who stated that the *History* was less than a masterpiece and that 'many of [Clark's] former students had feelings of extraordinary ambivalence towards the work of their mentor'. As well, the tone of Rickard's reaction to Ryan's outburst was more resigned than angry. On her copy of Rickard's review, Dymphna scribbled the Manningesque comment: 'This Rickard tries to run with the hare & hunt with the hounds. Woe unto you scribes & Pharisees, hypocrites!'<sup>10</sup>

We are witnessing a familiar enough spectacle—the transformation of an historian's widow from his most incisive critic to defender of the shrine. The irony is that in earlier days Dymphna had rather enjoyed Ryan's character assassinations when she and Manning lunched with him in Melbourne: 'He was absolutely undressing [people] and drawing and quartering them, and terribly, terribly funny'—and now her late husband was on the receiving end.<sup>11</sup>

7 Dymphna Clark to Lyndall Ryan, 16 September 1993, Dymphna Clark Papers, NLA, MS 9873, Series 10, Box 35, Folder 2.

8 Roslyn Russell, email to author, 30 August 2016; also Ann Moyal, discussion with author, Canberra, 11 June 2015; Gia Metherell, 'Skirmishes in cultured halls', *Canberra Times*, 14 June 1997 p. C3 (for Humphrey McQueen's comments at the time); Katerina and Axel Clark, interviewed by Susan Marsden, 19 June 2001, NLA, ORAL TRC 4770, p. 55 of transcript.

9 Dymphna Clark, interviewed by Heather Rusden, 13 February 1997 (starting at 73.38 minutes), NLA, ORAL TRC 3548, available at: [nla.gov.au/nla.obj-217338911/listen](http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-217338911/listen).

10 John Rickard, 'Manning abridged', *Age Weekend Supplement*, 13 November 1993, p. 8 (the newspaper clipping of the review containing Dymphna's remarks is in the Dymphna Clark Papers, NLA, MS 9873, Series 9, Box 35, Folder 16). A round-up of academic historians' opinions of the *History* at the time of the controversy is provided by Fiona Curruthers, 'Rise and fall of Australian history', *Australian*, 1 September 1993, p. 15.

11 Dymphna Clark, interviewed by Heather Rusden, 13 February 1997 (starting 70.50 minutes), NLA, ORAL TRC 3548, available at: [nla.gov.au/nla.obj-217338911/listen](http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-217338911/listen).



**Figure 4. Dymphna Clark, early 1990s.**

Although distressed by Peter Ryan's attack on her late husband, Dymphna maintained her dignity under fire.

Source. © Heide Smith Photographer 1990s ([heidesmith.com/](http://heidesmith.com/)). Reproduced with her permission.

In the immediate aftermath of Ryan's attack Dymphna received numerous letters of support, containing such phrases as 'disgusting personal attack', 'despicable', 'obscene', 'contemptible', 'how outraged I am'.<sup>12</sup> In contrast to Dymphna, her son Andrew, a senior journalist, made no attempt

---

<sup>12</sup> See also 'Corrie' to Axel Clark, 28 August 1993, Axel Clark Papers, NLA, MS Acc11.079, Box 17, Folder 2.

to play down the situation, correctly pointing out that Ryan's previous comments about his father's work 'bore no relation to the "Quadrant" attack', meaning that:

Only two conclusions are possible—either Mr Ryan is a hypocrite, or a bitter jealous, old man. In any event, as my father passed away more than two years ago and Mr Ryan had plenty of time to make comments while he was alive, I regard this as the outburst of an opportunistic, cowardly and graceless man.<sup>13</sup>

\* \* \*

The Ryan affair was described by literary journalist Peter Craven as a *succès de scandale*, and he more than implied that the instigator of the newspaper campaign was *Quadrant's* editor, Robert Manne, whose 'skill at making rapid interventions into the media ... give him an influence disproportionate to the marginality of his political position'—an assertion rightly disputed by Manne.<sup>14</sup> It was neither conspiracy nor undue influence at play but journalistic opportunity and the sober reality of *Quadrant's* finances. The journal, which published 10 issues per year, operated 'very sparingly'. One source of income was donations from mining companies, which Manne declined after Ray Evans of Western Mining tried to interfere with content. To maintain the cash flow, *Quadrant* routinely sought to have its articles partly or wholly re-printed in newspapers, primarily the *Australian*.<sup>15</sup> The daily press got hold of the story, when Michael Gawenda, deputy editor of the *Age*, happened to see an advance copy of Ryan's article, resulting in the scrappy front-page story in that newspaper on 27 August 1993. The story quickly assumed a life of its own with the *Weekend Australian* republishing the entire Ryan article two days later.<sup>16</sup> To maintain the momentum, and to turn what it described as the country's 'greatest literary brawl' into a self-fulfilling prophecy, the *Australian* advance-published the gist of Ryan's second *Quadrant* piece the following weekend.<sup>17</sup>

13 Quoted in Margaret Easterbrook, 'Clark's widow to let the History speak for itself', *Age*, 27 August 1993, p. 1.

14 Craven, 'The Ryan Affair', 167; Robert Manne, 'The Puzzles of Manning Clark: Postscript', *Quadrant*, vol. 38, no. 11, November 1994, pp. 2–3, specifically p. 3.

15 Robert Manne, 'A holy cow called history', *Age*, 1 September 1993, p. 16; Manne, email to author, 14 September 2014 and comment on an earlier version of this book, 13 March 2019. *Quadrant* did have the advantage, over other literary and political commentary magazines, at least before 1981, of having newsagent distribution through Gordon & Gooch magazines. This, and other aspects of *Quadrant's* finances, are discussed by Phillip Edmonds, *Tilting at Windmills: The Literary Magazine in Australia, 1968–2012*, Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2015, pp. 46, 95–96, 100, 109–10, 137, doi.org/10.20851/windmills.

16 Peter Ryan, 'Why Clark's history is bunk', *Weekend Australian*, 28–29 August 1993, pp. 21–22.

17 Peter Ryan, 'The history men', *Weekend Australian*, 4–5 September 1993, p. 21.



**Figure 5. Robert Manne, editor of *Quadrant* (1990–97), at around the time the controversy broke out.**

Source. Provided by Robert Manne (photographer unknown) and reproduced with the subject's permission.

It was Ryan's supposed authority as Clark's publisher and his strictures appearing in the *Australian*, with its national circulation, that did such damage to Clark's reputation and caused the controversy to reach the heights it did. Manne was most surprised by the strength of the reaction. After all, he had published a severe attack on Clark two years earlier by his (Clark's) former student John Barrett (1931–1997), which had barely caused a public ripple.<sup>18</sup> As it happened, the September 1993 issue of *Quadrant* sold out in days and Manne regretted not having had more copies printed.

The *Australian* and *Quadrant* both gave ample space to Ryan's critics. Michael Cathcart, who had just published a one-volume abridgement of Clark's *History*, deplored Ryan's 'lack of grace' and the deterioration of national debate that it represented.<sup>19</sup> Fuelling the controversy was the feeling that Ryan's article represented the betrayal of a friendship. Clark's recent biographers have largely confirmed Ryan's portrayal of Clark's flaws and foibles, but without depicting Clark as a charlatan in the ways Ryan did; their access to Clark's darker side was made possible by the lifting of the embargo on Clark's diaries in the National Library of Australia in 2000. As Ann Moyal points out, Clark's diaries:

Brought a new and confounding figure into view. Scribbled at night over half a century and yielding up their secrets of self-loathing and doubt, they tore at the chords of love in marriage, an ongoing litany of distrust, betrayal and disappointment. Here was a side of Manning Clark which close friends, myself included, neither recognised nor knew.<sup>20</sup>

But this was not part of the equation in 1993. Rather, Ryan's 'tittle-tattle', as Humphrey McQueen described it,<sup>21</sup> caused offence because it was gratuitous and irrelevant to the matter at hand.

18 John Barrett, 'Manning Clark: The Historian', *Quadrant*, vol. 35, nos 7–8, July–August 1991, pp. 7–8.

19 Michael Cathcart, 'The sage under siege', *Age*, 27 August 1993, p. 13 (and Cathcart, 'Clark's legacy undimmed', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1993, p. 11). See also *Manning Clark's History of Australia*, abridged by Michael Cathcart, Melbourne: MUP, 1993; Peter Corrigan, 'Brave new worlds', *Age*, 16 October 1993 (by-line column), p. 11.

20 Ann Moyal, *A Woman of Influence: Science, Men & History*, Perth: UWA Publishing, 2014, p. 62. Moyal (1926–2019) was by that time a Canberra-based independent scholar after having worked in several Australian universities, notably as an historian of science. She founded the Independent Scholars Association of Australia in 1995. Her earlier autobiography is *Breakfast with Beaverbrook: Memoirs of an Independent Woman*, Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1995.

21 Humphrey McQueen, *Suspect History: Manning Clark and the Future of Australia's Past*, Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 1997, p. 166.



Questions of professional ethics were also in the mix; namely, 'the breach of propriety when a publisher turns publicly on an author with whom he has worked and from whom he has benefited'.<sup>22</sup> The arguments are similar to those levelled a decade later against Herbert Breslin's unflattering account of Luciano Pavarotti, which was seen as a tasteless betrayal of a manager–client relationship.<sup>23</sup> Others, again, discerned an element of embittered attention seeking, while historian Ken Inglis (1929–2017), who had a long association with both Clark and Ryan, was distressed by the posthumous vilification.<sup>24</sup> As another of Ryan's detractors pointed out:

Of the many things in his life upon which Ryan must look back with shame, the 'chiefest' should be his Clark essay. With an editor like Ryan, a writer doesn't need critics or enemies.<sup>25</sup>

Yet another thread in the argument was that Ryan not only lacked compassion, but also that his rebuttal of the *History* was unhelpful in resolving 'the serious issue of how this country will determine what will stand as the truth of its history'.<sup>26</sup>

Robert Manne moved quickly to restore order, explaining that taking a hatchet to a corpse had not been the intention.<sup>27</sup> Rather, Ryan had proposed his critique in 1991 but Clark died a fortnight later and the project was put on hold. As for speaking ill of the dead, Manne went

---

22 For example, Stuart Macintyre, 'Clark's work sure to outlive its detractors', *Age*, 28 August 1993, for quotation see p. 17; Peter Craven, 'Publisher damned by attack on Clark', *Australian*, 1 September 1993, pp. 15, 19; Christopher Bantick, 'Clark's place in historical discourse', *Australian*, 8 September 1993, p. 22; Robert Hefner, 'Bound to quality: a tribute to a local printer', *Canberra Times*, 7 November 1993, p. 3; John Bangsund, 'Peter Ryan and the Phoney Debate', *Society of Editors Newsletter* (Melbourne), vol. 32, no. 2, September 1993, p. 3. For a send-up of Ryan's first *Quadrant* article, see Phillip Adams, 'God brought to book at last', *Weekend Australian Review*, 18–19 September 1993, p. 2.

23 Herbert Breslin and Anne Midgette, *The King and I: The Uncensored Tale of Luciano Pavarotti's Rise to Fame by His Manager, Friend and Sometime Adversary*, New York: Doubleday, 2004; Matt Dobkin, 'My Big Fat Obnoxious Opera-Singing Client', 14 October 2004, *New York Magazine*, n.p., available at: [nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/10106/index1.html](http://nymag.com/nymetro/news/people/features/10106/index1.html).

24 Don Watson, 'Peter Ryan: A Voice from the Great Back Paddock of Australian Grumps', in ('Symposium Defending Manning Clark'), *Evatt Papers*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1993, pp. 21–24, specifically p. 21; Ken Inglis, quoted in Catherine Armitage, 'Clark no fraud, say academics', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1993, p. 2. One of the greats of Australian history, Inglis's varied career is traced in Peter Browne and Seumas Spark (eds), *I Wonder: The Life and Work of Ken Inglis*, Melbourne: Monash University Publishing, 2020.

25 Andrew Field, 'Clark's editor: a paragon of infidelity' (by-line column), *Courier-Mail*, 15 September 1993, p. 8.

26 Peter Corrigan, 'Brave new worlds', *Age*, 16 October 1993, p. 11.

27 Manne, 'A holy cow called history', *Age*, 1 September 1993, p. 16, republished as 'Manning Clark, Peter Ryan and Us', *Quadrant*, vol. 37, no. 10, October 1993, pp. 2–3.



on to ask, quite reasonably, whether ‘one of [Australia’s] most important thinkers should be placed under a semi-permanent moratorium’, and whether Clark had considered the feelings of Dame Pattie and her family when repeatedly denigrating long-serving Liberal Prime Minister R.G. Menzies (1894–1978) in Volume 6 of the *History*. Manne also claimed that, far from committing a cowardly action, Ryan had shown considerable courage in publishing his article given the wrath that would come down on his head, and he assured readers that the timing of Ryan’s article had not been planned to coincide with the publication of Cathcart’s abridgment of the *History* in the hope of damaging sales. He was unaware of the book’s imminent publication; and a delighted MUP promptly printed 4,000 further copies to meet the anticipated extra demand.<sup>28</sup>

Manne also disputed the claim that *Quadrant* had run recurrent attacks on Clark down the years, stating that the magazine had published only four significant critiques. He was mistaken. Although there had been two pieces favourable to Clark,<sup>29</sup> there were at least 17 articles in which he received unfavourable mention, seven of which could be described as ‘significant’ (Appendix 1). But the burden of Manne’s argument was to rebut the accusations of vilification, claiming that Ryan had instead revealed the interconnectedness between the faults in Clark’s work and the faults in his character—a point that I will go on to dispute. The other justification for *Quadrant* publishing Ryan’s article was that discussion on Clark’s work was long overdue, but this can hardly be countenanced given how much assessment had already taken place (Appendix 2). A notable example, among many, was R.W. Connell’s 1978 critique of Clark’s methods, including the charge that Clark lacked a ‘formulated concept of structure and structural change’.<sup>30</sup> At that point Clark would probably have been the most discussed Australian historian after W.K. Hancock (1898–1988). Indeed, Clark’s public profile as an historian was indicated

28 ‘Quiet delight over Clark row’, *Canberra Times*, 28 August 1993, p. 4; ‘History’s success puts criticism into perspective’, *Uni News*, University of Melbourne, 3 September 1993, p. 1; Rod Campbell, ‘Fracas over historian’s work helps sales’, *Canberra Times*, 7 September 1993, p. 12.

29 Heinz Arndt, ‘The Real Manning Clark’, *Quadrant*, vol. 20, no. 11, November 1976, pp. 18–19; J.J. Eddy, ‘The Clark Paradox’, review of *Manning Clark and Australian History*, by Stephen Holt, *Quadrant*, vol. 26, no. 8, August 1982, pp. 62–64.

30 R.W. Connell, ‘Manning Clark and the Science of History’, *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 2, 1978, pp. 262–68.

by the appearance of Stephen Holt's intellectual biography of Clark, published in 1982.<sup>31</sup> If anything, discussion on Clark's work amounted to overkill.

In addition to Manne's defence, Ryan received a considerable measure of wider public support. Both the *Australian* and the *Age* editorialised that he had acted 'responsibly', in contrast to the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Canberra Times* editorials that Clark's *History* would live on.<sup>32</sup> There were letters to newspapers, thanking Ryan for exposing the fraudulence of Clark and his *History* and deploring Clark's baleful effect on Australian public life.<sup>33</sup> Several regular newspaper columnists also delivered hosannas, with one exclaiming that

at the risk of being lynched by the historian's many admirers, I think Ryan's piece is one of the best examples of the art of essay writing I have ever seen. To me, it is not so much an attack as a frank and well-rounded portrait of a fascinating Australian personality.<sup>34</sup>

Another columnist was a former history professor, Austin Gough, who used Ryan's article (which he had not actually seen) as the vehicle for a perceptive and generally temperate critique of the *History*, especially the religious aspects.<sup>35</sup>

31 Stephen Holt, *Manning Clark and Australian History, 1915–1963*, Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 1982.

32 'Historic battles', *Age*, 27 August 1993, p. 12; 'The fatal flaws of history', *Weekend Australian*, 28–29 August 1993, p. 20; 'Manning Clark's history lives', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 28 August 1993, p. 28; 'Manning Clark will outlast most critics', *Canberra Times*, 28 August 1993, p. 12.

33 For example, 'Debunking a national icon', *News Weekly*, 11 September 1993, p. 7; Paul Lynch, 'Ryan's decision to publish proved responsible' (letter) *Australian*, 11–12 September 1993, p. 18; Colin Kennedy, 'Manning Clark unreliable' (letter), *Canberra Times*, 23 October 1993, p. 3.

34 Paul Gray, 'When praise turns abruptly into farce' (by-line column), *Herald Sun*, 2 October 1993, for quotation see p. 18; David Clark, 'Critics miss fatal flaws' (by-line column), *Australian Financial Review*, 30 August 1993, p. 17; Frank Devine, 'Clark a captive of Gaullist delusions' (by-line column), *Australian*, 2 September 1993, p. 15; Les Carlyon (by-line column), *Business Review Weekly*, 3 September 1993, p. 16; Ronald Conway, 'A cry of support for Clark's critic', *Australian*, 15 September 1993, p. 19.

35 Austin Gough, 'Singular view of our past exposed' (by-line column), *Mercury* (Hobart), 4 September 1993, p. 28. A.G. Gough (1926–1997), emeritus professor of history at the University of Adelaide, was living in retirement in Tasmania. As well as his fortnightly column in the *Mercury*, he was an regular contributor to the conservative *Adelaide Review*. See Don Longo, 'The Fin-de-siècle Academy and its Discontents: Austin Gough and the Betrayal of the Intellectuals', *Journal of Labor and Society*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2017, pp. 285–305, doi.org/10.1111/wusa.12293.

However, the conservative side of politics was not unvarying in its defence. Ryan was tellingly reproached from an unexpected quarter when Gerard Henderson, the director of the Sydney Institute, stated that he had said nothing new and went on to rebuke him for not speaking out much earlier: 'Welcome aboard Peter—but where were you when we needed you?'<sup>36</sup>

\* \* \*

Ryan rounded on his opponents in a follow-up article in the October 1993 issue of *Quadrant*, titled simply 'A Reply to my Critics'. He opened by expressing surprise at being on the receiving end of a 'hubbub of abuse'.

Whew! An old publisher submits an essay to a small-circulation literary journal in Melbourne; a few home-truths about an Australian sacred cow escape into the atmosphere; a national media bushfire ignites. Truly, Australia remains a very provincial place.<sup>37</sup>

The surprise was hardly genuine in the light of Manne's statement that when Ryan first proposed his attack, he was

already imagining the anger of Manning [who was still alive at the time] and the social ostracism which would be visited upon him by his vast network of friends and admirers. Never mind, it had to be done.<sup>38</sup>

One of Ryan's tactics was to ignore telling or inconvenient criticism, including that of Gerard Henderson. The other stratagems were to concentrate on points of weakness in his critics' arguments rather than addressing their wider concerns, and to twist the meaning of what they said. Thus, historian and writer Don Watson's description of Ryan as a 'cannibal' is used as an example of the abuse heaped upon him and at the same time making Watson look somewhat daft.<sup>39</sup> What Watson actually said was that Ryan's posthumous attack on Clark was 'an act of double cannibalism really. You live off him in life and when he's dead you live off

36 Gerard Henderson, 'Bless him, it is 30 years since he sinned', *Age*, 27 August 1993, p. 13; Henderson, 'The belated Mr Ryan owes us a penance', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 August 1993, p. 11.

37 Peter Ryan, 'A Reply to my Critics', in his *Lines of Fire: Manning Clark & Other Writings*, edited by A.K. Macdougall, Binalong, NSW: Clarion Editions, 1997, pp. 214–22, for quotation see p. 214.

38 Manne, 'A holy cow called history', *Age*, 1 September 1993, p. 16.

39 Ryan, 'A Reply to my Critics', p. 215.

him again'.<sup>40</sup> In similar fashion, Paul Bourke (1938–1999), director of the Research School of Social Sciences at The Australian National University, is derided for the inscrutable title of his critique in the *Canberra Times* ('Ryan is playing with the "pornography of power"'). Bourke was referring to the obscenity of visceral public attacks on prominent figures in the community, but the title of his piece (the work of a sub-editor) makes little sense in and of itself.<sup>41</sup> Ryan, however, was within his rights to suggest a conflict of interest in that Bourke was in the throes of raising funds for a Manning Clark Chair of History at ANU.<sup>42</sup> Ryan didn't realise that Bourke, while publicly supportive of Clark, was in fact highly critical of the latter's scholarship, or else Ryan would have had another point of attack against Bourke, who should not have entered the fray in the first place.<sup>43</sup>

A third target was Peter Craven, who had referred to the

bizarre attack by the man personally responsible for the state in which Manning Clark's *A History of Australia* was presented to the public ... Clearly in Ryan's own terms he was a failure as a publisher.<sup>44</sup>

(As will be seen in Chapter 8 of this book, it was not so straightforward because Clark was hardly a compliant author.)

Ryan's stock answer to such criticisms was not to answer them at all, but to describe Craven's intervention as a 'tizzy' that 'splutters rather than speaks', and to

offer a small prize—say a genuinely unread copy of the Manning Clark abridgement—to the first person who can elucidate the meaning of Craven's concluding paragraph when he wanders off inexplicably to Edmund Wilson.<sup>45</sup>

40 'Quiet delight over Clark row', *Canberra Times*, 28 August 1993, for quotation see p. 4; Gerard Henderson, 'Backroom maestro finds the limelight', *Age*, 19 October 1993, p. 13.

41 Paul Bourke, 'Ryan is playing with the "pornography of power"', *Canberra Times*, 28 August 1993, p. 4; Peter Ryan, *Final Proof: Memoirs of a Publisher*, Sydney: Quadrant Books, 2010, p. 49.

42 Ryan, 'A Reply to my Critics', p. 218.

43 Austin Gough to Ryan, 6 September 1993, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 2; Ryan to Bourke, 26 August 1994 (faxed message), Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 5; Ryan to Heinz Arndt, 17 May 1992 [should be 1994] (faxed message), Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 9, Folder 1.

44 Craven, 'Publisher damned by attack on Clark', *Australian*, 1 September 1993, p. 15.

45 Ryan, 'A Reply to my Critics', p. 219.

University of Melbourne historian Stuart Macintyre is also taken to task for his comment on the 'PM' radio station that Ryan was unqualified, as a non-historian, to criticise Clark.<sup>46</sup> Aged 46, Macintyre was already a leading figure in the Australian historical profession. His statement gives the impression of academic arrogance, yet elsewhere Ryan admits to achieving only 'an undistinguished second-class Honours BA'.<sup>47</sup> Certainly, Ryan had nothing original to say about the *History*, either then or later. But it was Macintyre's accusation of cowardice in launching the posthumous betrayal of Clark that stuck in Ryan's craw. As we have seen with Andrew Clark's comments, Macintyre was by no means alone in making such an observation, but Ryan's pugnacious reaction was as though it were:

It is not an accusation I often face and I cannot, offhand, recall the name of any survivor. If Macintyre means that it does not take much courage to face a yapping pack of briefly woken-up Australian historians, he may be right. If he means something else, he is invited to stand within arm's reach the next time he says it.<sup>48</sup>

To which, one of Ryan's friends responded that he hoped to be present, camera in hand, in the event of 'fisticuffs'.<sup>49</sup> A commentator later asserted:

[Macintyre's] accusation of cowardice was particularly bizarre, since Macintyre, like Clark, had probably never touched a toy gun, whereas Ryan served with conspicuous gallantry in New Guinea in the jungle and mountains.<sup>50</sup>

It is not a helpful statement, except perhaps to demonstrate that the often-personalised mode of debate continued well after 1993. (In fact, Macintyre had practised with a .303 rifle containing live ammunition during compulsory Cadets at Scotch College, Melbourne.) Seventeen years later, Ryan announced that 'the offer [to fisticuffs] remains open', implying that Macintyre had been too gutless to tangle with him.<sup>51</sup>

46 Ryan, 'A Reply to my Critics', p. 215. Various radio stations ran interviews with interested parties in the two days following the disclosure of Ryan's first *Quadrant* article. There are three listings of these interviews in undated notes by Ryan to himself, in the Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folders 2, 3 & 4.

47 Ryan, *Final Proof*, pp. 20, 106.

48 Ryan, 'A Reply to my Critics', p. 216.

49 Michael [Cannon] to Ryan, 5 September 1993, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 3.

50 Geoffrey Partington, *Making Sense of History*, Bloomington, IN: Xlibris, 2013, p. 189.

51 Peter Ryan, 'My Life as a Leper', *Quadrant*, vol. 55, nos 1–2, January–February 2011, pp. 127–28, specifically p. 128.



**Figure 6. Michael Cathcart (foreground) and Stuart Macintyre were both critics of Peter Ryan.**

They are pictured at the launch of a careers in arts brochure at the University of Melbourne Union, 24 July 2000.

Source. © Michael Silver 2000 (Magnet Galleries Melbourne Inc., magnet.org.au). Reproduced with the permission of photographer and subjects.

It was actually Ryan who lacked the courage of his convictions by avoiding Macintyre's offers at the time to debate the issue on radio or television, or even to appear on such media (for example, Mary Delahunty's ABC-TV cultural program), preferring instead to confine himself to print where he could not be immediately challenged.<sup>52</sup> Macintyre came to see the futility of it all, given that Ryan's 'mixture of personal abuse and misunderstanding of history provided little of substance to discuss'.<sup>53</sup> Less than a year later, Ryan misrepresented the situation by telling a correspondent that 'hardly anyone was prepared to sit down [at the time] and have a face-to-face argument—even a shouting match, if they had wanted'.<sup>54</sup>

52 Stuart Macintyre, 'Why do the Tories hate Manning Clark?' in ('Symposium Defending Manning Clark'), *Evatt Papers*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1993, pp. 17–21, specifically p. 17; Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, 2nd edn, Melbourne: MUP, 2004, p. 226.

53 Macintyre, 'Why do the Tories hate Manning Clark?', pp. 17–20, for quotation see p. 17; Peter Ryan, notes of phone conversation with Brian Millership, 6 March 1995, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 8.

54 Ryan to John Parsons, 21 August 1994, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 5.

Neither does Ryan mention the level of private support he received; it suited his purposes to represent himself as a victim of serial abuse. In fact, he was favoured with numerous letters of affirmation from friends and strangers alike. Some of the latter were ‘Concerned Australian[s]’, as one described himself, whose alarmist sentiments indicate that the mere mention of Manning Clark was a political statement in itself:

I have genuine sympathy for the wife and other family members of Manning Clark. However, I would ask them to understand that [Peter Ryan’s article] is akin to the lancing of a huge, painful carbuncle for those of us who have suffered for so long ... I believe Manning Clark and his supporters (the Whitlams, the Hawkes, the Keatings, et al) have been in no small part responsible for what I see as the destruction of Australian values, culture and independence during the 70’s and 80’s. I live in the hope that those of us of the opposite persuasion may prevail over the next several decades, in order to rescue Australia from the edge of the terrible abyss upon which it currently teeters.<sup>55</sup>

Another such product of the History Wars came from ‘a plain man of advancing years’:

Oh, my! what a to-do, what a fox to loose among the academic chickens; oh! the feathers that will fly; the dust that will be raised ... I am sure that I speak for the majority of Australians—that mysterious ‘silent majority’ who, like me, seldom put pen to paper, but who, thank God, still have the power—when I congratulate you on having the courage to say what you thought about a work which, if not questioned, could be accepted as gospel by future generations of young Australians.<sup>56</sup>

A friend also wrote to Ryan saying that ‘I agree with everything you’ve said and I haven’t read the fucking history’, and a stranger reassured him that

I think it was right and good *what* you did, *when* you did, and I hope that others who think the same will, like me, overcome their diffidence to write and let you know of their support.<sup>57</sup>

55 Brian J. Hurlock, letter to the *Australian* (unpublished), 30 August 1993, attached to Hurlock to Ryan, 6 September 1993, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 2. Actually, Clark and Hawke were not enamoured with each other. See McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity*, pp. 10, 302, 609.

56 L. George Martin to Ryan, 31 August 1993, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 4.

57 (Signature indecipherable) to Ryan, 29 August 1993; Zoe Osman to Ryan, 4 September 1993, respectively, both in Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 3.



Yet another correspondent noted, after itemising numerous errors of Clark's concerning a forebear, that Volume 2 of the *History* made 'a good door stop against the wind'.<sup>58</sup>

Ryan also had academic endorsers. An academic lawyer congratulated him for having 'cracked the whole "PC" closed shop'.<sup>59</sup> Archivist Barbara Ross told Ryan, 'I have greatly admired your honesty and forthrightness in writing as you did. And it has become so very necessary that someone should say all that you said'.<sup>60</sup> Support from another unexpected quarter came from ANU anthropologist Derek Freeman (1916–2001), the nemesis of fellow anthropologist Margaret Mead (1901–1978), who wrote to Ryan as a fellow sufferer, having borne the slings and arrows of Mead's devotees. Freeman's repudiation of Mead was also posthumous, the difference being that he confronted Mead about his concerns over her work 14 years before she died.<sup>61</sup>

In short, Ryan cast himself in the role of a victim without indicating that many supported his stance and applauded his heroic exposé of the emperor's lack of clothes. Ryan never publicly acknowledged the level of endorsement he received, instead depicting himself as an innocent set upon by a bunch of thugs. As we shall see, these are just two of the distortions that leave his version of events having little credibility.

---

58 Edna Bateman Rich[ards?] to Ryan, undated, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 2.

59 Geoffrey deQ. Walker (University of Queensland) to Ryan, 4 March 1994, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 6. Similar sentiments were expressed in Simon H. Haskell (Deakin University) to Ryan, 10 September 1993, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 2.

60 Barbara Ross to Ryan, 14 November 1994, Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 5. At one point, Ross (1929–2005) had been attached to the history department at ANU in the Research School of Social Sciences—an institution that Clark viewed askance.

61 Derek Freeman to Ryan, 4 October 1992 [should be 1993], Ryan Papers, NLA, MS 9897, Series 6, Box 10, Folder 2; Peter Hempenstall, *Truth's Fool: Derek Freeman and the War over Cultural Anthropology*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2017, pp. 98–100, doi.org/10.1111/aman.13063.

This text is taken from *History Wars: The Peter Ryan – Manning Clark Controversy*, by Doug Munro, published 2021 by ANU Press,  
The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

[doi.org/10.22459/HW.2021.03](https://doi.org/10.22459/HW.2021.03)