

Prologue

In death as in life, Manning Clark has retained the capacity to disturb and astound his fellow Australians. He continues to generate conflict.

Stephen Holt (1999)¹

Clark has always boldly accepted the view that history-writing is ultimately an imaginative art—or so his practice suggests. Through it, Clark declares his own vision of spiritual purpose, and of the dilemmas inherent in the process of living.

A.A. Phillips (1978)²

In 1993, Peter Ryan (1923–2015), the former director of Melbourne University Press (hereafter MUP), launched an out-of-the-blue attack on the work and character of his best-selling author Manning Clark (1915–1991), who had died two-and-a-half years earlier. The assault took place in the September 1993 issue of the conservative monthly journal *Quadrant*, and it caused quite a stir.³ The catalyst was one of the Wednesday lunchtime gatherings involving Robert Manne, a political scientist and editor of *Quadrant*, and a group of colleagues at La Trobe University. At one of these meetings—on 8 May 1991 to be exact—Ryan was in attendance and he asked whether *Quadrant* would be interested in an essay on Clark. As Manne recalled: ‘The subject of Clark had clearly been weighing heavily on his mind. He spoke of his intention to write an

1 Stephen Holt, *A Short History of Manning Clark*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1999, p. 231.

2 A.A. Phillips, ‘The Unlucky Countryman: Manning Clark’s Lawson’, *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 37, July 1978, pp. 257–61, specifically p. 257.

3 Ryan’s attack on Clark and his replies to critics were spread over three issues of *Quadrant*: Peter Ryan, ‘Manning Clark’, *Quadrant*, vol. 37, no. 9, September 1993, pp. 9–22; Ryan, ‘A Reply to my Critics’, *Quadrant*, vol. 37, no. 10, October 1993, pp. 11–14; Ryan, ‘The Charge of the Lightweight Brigade’, *Quadrant*, vol. 38, no. 10, October 1994, pp. 10–14. The three articles were republished in his *Lines of Fire: Manning Clark & Other Writings*, ed. A.K. Macdougall, Binalong, NSW: Clarion Editions, 1997, pp. 179–234. The page references throughout are to the *Lines of Fire* versions.

essay about his old friend; it would not be flattering'. In full knowledge that severe criticism would follow, Ryan was determined that the job 'had to be done'.⁴ Clark died a fortnight later and the proposed essay went into abeyance, only for Ryan to resurrect the idea in mid-1993. Manne was still interested, on the grounds that a 'serious discussion' of Clark's *History* that showed 'the interconnection between character and work' was overdue; he hoped that "Quadrant" might become the forum for a lively debate about the status of Clark's "History".⁵ Ryan duly delivered in August 1993 and his essay was promptly published.

Ryan started in uncompromising fashion: 'This essay is an overdue axe laid to the stalk of a tall poppy'.⁶ In a full-throated assault on Clark as both a person and an historian, Ryan catalogued his victim's personal faults and indiscretions—the drinking sprees of his earlier days, his neediness, 'his propensity to strike an attitude',⁷ his 'humbug',⁸ his unworthy criticisms of others, his indictable offences as an historian and his delinquencies as an MUP author. He then wades into Clark's six-volume *A History of Australia* as having the 'insubstantiality of thistledown', of being 'a construct spun from fairy floss'⁹ and adding for good measure that 'Clark's literary style was bad to the point of embarrassment'.¹⁰ Ryan also makes the extraordinary statement, with all the zeal of the repentant sinner, that:

Of the many things in my life upon which I must look back with shame, the chiefest is that of having been the publisher of Clark's *History of Australia*, and of having given him that support and encouragement which an author expects of his publisher.¹¹

He goes on to describe the *History* as 'largely an imposition on Australian credulity—more plainly, a fraud'. The author, Ryan went on to assure his readers, was 'partly a mountebank',¹² and he berated the Australian historical profession for its dereliction in failing to expose the sheer

4 Robert Manne, 'A holy cow called history', *Age*, 1 September 1993, p. 16; Manne, email to author, 10 March 2018.

5 Manne, 'A holy cow called history', *Age*, 1 September 1993, p. 16; Cameron Forbes, 'The men who wrinkled history's page', *Weekend Australian*, 28–29 August 1993, p. 4.

6 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', p. 179.

7 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', p. 188.

8 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', pp. 182, 202.

9 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', p. 180.

10 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', p. 212.

11 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', p. 181.

12 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', pp. 200–1.

awfulness of Clark's work. He acknowledged that Clark's *History* was 'born ... of a weighty and even noble vision';¹³ apart from that it was without redeeming feature.

Ryan's initial attack in the September 1993 issue of *Quadrant* caused immediate uproar, with Clark's family and friends in high dudgeon. Ryan had never publicly declared his dissatisfaction with his author or the *History* in the 25 years (from 1962 until 1987) that he had published the remaining five volumes of the *History*, and neither did he convey to Clark his dissatisfactions at any point during their lengthy professional relationship.¹⁴ To the contrary, he encouraged Clark every step of the way as well as vigorously promoting the *History* and praising its author to the skies. But now Ryan was telling the world that the *History* contained 'over a million printed English words, probably unrivalled in their power to combine the non sequitur with the anti-climax, and to wring the last drops from a series of foregone conclusions'.¹⁵ The unforeseen posthumous attack, and its ferocity, caused reeling and revelling, depending on what side of the political fence one stood. More than 25 years later, the episode still resonates.

Even so, the sceptic is entitled to ask: what does a controversy that basically lasted a fortnight as a media and talkback radio event mean to us almost 30 years later? When responding to his critics, following the publication of his first *Quadrant* article on Clark, Ryan observed that their reactions demonstrated that Australia was still 'a very provincial place'.¹⁶ The implication is that the 'Clark controversy' or the 'Ryan affair', as it is variously called, was just another storm in a teacup, involving small-minded people indulging their bitchiness in ways that had no possible significance for those with a broader perspective on the world. To the contrary, the Ryan–Clark imbroglio is noteworthy because it extended well into the public realm, to the extent of being debated in Britain. Memorable in itself, the controversy also matters because it exposed fault lines in the ongoing Australia History Wars. The issues laid bare

13 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', for quotation see p. 180, also p. 205.

14 Clark's project is comprised of: *A History of Australia*. Volume 1: *From the Earliest Times to the Age of Macquarie* (1962); Volume 2: *New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land, 1822–1838* (1968); Volume 3: *The Beginning of an Australian Civilisation, 1824–1851* (1973); Volume 4: *The Earth Abideth for Ever, 1851–1888* (1978); Volume 5: *The People Make Laws, 1890–1915* (1981); Volume 6: *'The old dead tree and the young tree green', 1916–1935* (1987), all published by MUP.

15 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', p. 214.

16 Ryan, 'A Reply to my Critics', p. 214.

have not gone away. As if to underline the extent of ongoing interest in the Ryan–Clark controversy, a somewhat hagiographic short biography of Peter Ryan (*Ryan's Luck*) appeared in November 2020, written by his friend Peter Tidey, in which the controversy is discussed at some length.¹⁷ Moreover, in excess of half the first review of *Ryan's Luck*, which appeared the following month in *Quadrant*, is taken up by discussion of Clark and/or the controversy.¹⁸ Both biographer and reviewer accept Ryan's version of events, which is repudiated in the present book.¹⁹

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Ryan said that a given author 'is of but passing interest'. What matters is the subject—the person or thing that is being discussed.²⁰ Nonetheless, the genesis of the present book should be explained and the reader is entitled to know why (and how) I embarked on a study of this sort when my interest in the Ryan–Clark controversy was so belated. I barely noticed the imbroglio when it erupted and only got around to reading Ryan's first *Quadrant* article in 1999. I was teaching at the University of the South Pacific for much of the 1990s and my concerns lay elsewhere. Gradually, I became less interested in Pacific Islands history—I left Fiji at the beginning of 2000—and my research and writing increasingly turned to biography, and more specifically to 'telling academic lives', particularly in Australia.

Ryan gradually worked himself into the picture. I had been aware from at least the early 1970s that Ryan was a long-serving director of MUP, and I was—and remain—mightily impressed with his wartime narrative *Fear Drive My Feet*.²¹ In 1997, I referred to it as 'the incomparable personal

17 John Tidey, *Ryan's Luck: A Life of Peter Ryan MM*, Melbourne: Arcadia, 2020, pp. 44, 68, 104–11.

18 Robert Murray, 'The Punch and Sparkle of Peter Ryan', review of *Ryan's Luck*, by John Tidey, *Quadrant*, vol. 64, no. 12, December 2020, pp. 91–93.

19 Every so often down the years, a Ryan supporter has come out in sturdy defence of his attacks on Manning Clark, endorsing Ryan's depiction of what happened—e.g. Andrew Bolt, 'The thought deadening legacy of Manning Clark', 11 February 2007, *Herald-Sun* (Melbourne), available at: blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/index.php/heraldsun/comments/the_thought_deadening_legacy_of_manning_clark/P20/ (viewed on 3 September 2015 but site discontinued); Peter Coleman, 'Australian notes', *Spectator Australia*, 15 January 2011, www.spectator.co.uk/australia/6613193/australiannotes-67/ (viewed on 1 September 2014 but site discontinued).

20 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', p. 183.

21 Peter Ryan, *Fear Drive My Feet*, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1959, and subsequent editions. Excerpts republished in his *Lines of Fire*, pp. 19–38. In my view, *Fear Drive My Feet* rivals Eric Feldt's *The Coast Watchers*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1946. That's how good it is.

account of the New Guinea campaign by Peter Ryan'.²² On the other hand I was becoming less enamoured of Ryan as a public commentator, remarking in 2007 that he was 'adding his mite to the vulgarisation of public discourse in Australia'.²³ We 'crossed paths' again in 2012 when I reviewed Mark McKenna's biography of Clark, this time observing that 'there was much truth in Ryan's allegations [against Clark] ... but his tone and his very motivations were just cause for offence'.²⁴ I also raised the obvious points: why did Ryan continue to publish a multivolume work that he considered substandard, and why did he not tackle Clark about these perceived shortcomings at any point in their 25-year professional relationship? (He never adequately answered these questions, even when pressed to do so.)

Over the next 18 months, I became increasingly aware that Ryan's version of events didn't stack up. I was also struck by the extent to which he personalised and politicised everything, while in the same breath accusing his critics from the 'loquacious Left' of being emotional and ideological. A related problem, as I saw it, was Ryan's continuing hostilities despite saying, in 1994, that he hoped 'never to write another word about Manning Clark, who has occupied much time during which I would have preferred to be thinking about something else'.²⁵ Yet he kept on attacking Clark in print. There was also Ryan's allegation that Clark's *History* was waved through by academic reviewers down the years. Indeed, a central plank in Ryan's argument is his assertion that the Australian historical profession was a halfway house between a protection racket and a sheltered workshop whereby a miscreant author was shielded against valid criticism. Yet Clark had plenty of critics within the historical profession, and Ryan was in a position to know this.

In light of these misgivings I decided, in January 2014, to re-examine the Ryan–Clark affair and to embark on a forensic re-evaluation. Two broad conclusions quickly became apparent. First Ryan's criticisms of Clark's *History* were wholly unoriginal. Second, much of what Ryan says is

22 Doug Munro, 'The Making of *Ai Matai*: A Cautionary Tale in Fijian Historiography and Publishing', *Pacific Studies*, vol. 20, no. 3, 1997, pp. 61–79, specifically p. 75 n.10.

23 Doug Munro, review of *Ida Leeson: A Life: Not a Blue-Stocking Lady*, by Sylvia Martin, *Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 42, no. 1, 2007, pp. 125–27, specifically p. 126, doi.org/10.1080/00223340701286958.

24 Doug Munro, review of *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, by Mark McKenna, *Reviews in History*, review no. 1253, 17 May 2012, available at: www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1253.

25 Ryan, 'The Charge of the Lightweight Brigade', p. 234.

inaccurate. He is not a trustworthy source of information. Whether you call the present study a post-mortem or the exhumation of a grave, it is a minute chapter-and-verse examination of the bases of Ryan's strictures—their inaccuracies, false representations and strategic omissions—as well as a systematisation of the scattered and piecemeal defences offered on behalf of Clark. Hence the need for heavy footnoting.

Years later, Ryan recalled how he was treated in the manner of a leper in biblical times:

My infection with the socially embarrassing distemper of literary leprosy arose from a long article in *Quadrant* of September 1993. It was only my second contribution to that admirable magazine [it was actually his fifth²⁶], and it is interesting now to reflect that it was written with high encouragement from its then Editor, Robert Manne.

That article re-examined the value of the work of historian Manning Clark, who had died a few years earlier. Re-reading it the other day, some seventeen years later, I remained confident that it was written in polite terms, and that all its assertions were backed by cogent evidence. Of course I realised that my conclusions would be widely unacceptable, but I took it for granted that contrary argument would be made within the arena of reasonable evidence and civil language: I never made a bigger mistake in my life.²⁷

Ryan's version of events cannot be accepted as a reasonable way of looking at the controversy. Clark could be a sloppy writer as well as being a needy and sometimes uncooperative author. The reader will soon discern that I am no more enamoured of Clark now than I have been in the past, but I believe that Ryan behaved badly. Hence my motivation for writing this book parallels that of David Marr when he decided to embark on a biography of Sir Garfield Barwick (1903–1997)—namely, that Marr was horrified by Barwick's involvement in The Dismissal of the Whitlam Government in 1975, and the abuse of his supposedly politically neutral

26 The previous four contributions were: Ryan, 'The Fall and Mr Fairfax', review of *Heralds and Angels: The House of Fairfax, 1841–1990*, by Gavin Souter, *Quadrant*, vol. 35, no. 6, June 1991, pp. 72–74; Ryan, 'Did People Laugh before 1700?', review of *The Oxford Book of Humorous Prose from William Caxton to P.G. Wodehouse*, by Frank Muir, *Quadrant*, vol. 35, no. 12, December 1991, pp. 76–78; Ryan, 'A.D. Hope: A Memoir', *Quadrant*, vol. 36, nos 7–8, July–August 1992, pp. 30–40 (reprinted in his *Lines of Fire*, pp. 153–76); Ryan, 'Hasluck: The Private Man', *Quadrant*, vol. 37, no. 3, March 1993, pp. 21–24 (reprinted in his *Lines of Fire*, pp. 129–37).

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

role as chief justice of Australia that this entailed. Although the present book deals with a much less momentous event, I too have sought the reasons why Ryan behaved in the manner he did. Or in Marr's words, 'I had to understand how that man could have done what he did. I wanted to work it out for myself and explain it to others'.²⁸ The urge to write, after all, comes from not knowing and wanting to find out. That was my agenda. There was also the purely professional interest in pursuing a story worth telling and the prospect of venturing into new academic territory.

In the process, I have reached negative conclusions about Ryan after comparing what he wrote in *Quadrant*, and afterwards, with the newspaper coverage at the time. In addition, I consulted several sets of personal papers, his own included, various oral history interviews (in the National Library of Australia), the files relating to Clark's *History* and the minutes of the MUP Board of Management (at the University of Melbourne Archives). Ryan's habitual evasiveness and untruthfulness is striking. Ironically, the most incriminating evidence against Ryan is found in his own papers and in his autobiography, *Final Proof: Memoirs of a Publisher*.²⁹ In the interests of fairness and accuracy, I have given Ryan every opportunity to put his case by quoting from his writings. Paraphrasing can run the risk of distortion, so his actual wording is used wherever possible. He does write very well, and unambiguously at that. As well as documentary research and a reading of the relevant literature, I spoke to numerous colleagues who well remember the Ryan–Clark controversy. The level of interest in what I was doing somewhat surprised me. Mostly I would raise the subject in casual conversation and the respondents often sang like nightingales. Sometimes I was approached and information was volunteered—whether criticism of the *History*, or negative comments about Ryan, and occasionally positive statements about him. People were also contacted by email. The only formal interview was over the telephone with Michael Cathcart. All in all, I cast a fairly wide net.

I should add that researching and writing this book was not a furtive exercise, whereas prior knowledge of Ryan's attack on Clark had been within a closed circle. I told many colleagues of my plans and progress. I gave forewarning with seminar presentations on the subject at Flinders

28 Quoted in Melanie Suzanne Wilson, 'David Marr: A Man of Conviction', Sydney Writers' Festival, 20 May 2015, available at: atthefestival.wordpress.com/2015/05/20/david-marr-a-man-of-conviction/; David Marr, *Barwick*, Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1980.

29 Peter Ryan, *Final Proof: Memoirs of a Publisher*, Sydney: Quadrant Books, 2010.

University in 2015 and at the University of Melbourne the following year. I announced my intentions in a couple of publications (freely available on the internet as well as in print), where it is clear that I am no apologist for Clark.³⁰

What I did not do was to contact Ryan, although he could have easily found out what I was up to. Initially, I was not far enough into the research to ask the right questions. For example, when I gave my seminar presentation at Flinders University in mid-2015 I had yet to learn about MUP's contractual arrangements with Clark (which Ryan comprehensively misrepresents and which I would never have thought to question). The further I got into the research the more I realised that Ryan was misleading, wrong or just plain downright dishonest in so many matters. There came the point when I decided not to contact him, realising that an interview, or even correspondence, would likely be confrontational and unproductive. It is hard to see what would have been accomplished and I would probably have been accused of harassing a defenceless old man who was in poor health. I am in two minds about how I handled the matter. There is an element of regret in not having at least sent him a letter of enquiry, if only to avoid the admission in this paragraph. It would also have put him on notice. On the other hand, my feeling that nothing good would have resulted from any such letter is seemingly vindicated because I later learned that Ryan was loath to admit that he might be in error.

Writing aversely about the recently deceased (Ryan died in late 2015) carries risks, just as Ryan himself was criticised for the same thing in relation to Clark in 1993. Ryan could not complain, at least in principle, given his statement at the time that '[t]he notion that the dead should stand immune in some sanctuary is a mealy-mouthed cop-out'.³¹ Ryan also justified his disclosures on Clark on the grounds that 'the drive of Manning Clark's life was to be a *public* citizen' [emphasis in original],³²

30 Doug Munro, 'The "Intrusion" of Personal Feelings: Biographical Dilemmas', *Flinders Journal of History and Politics*, vol. 30, 2014, pp. 3–20, specifically pp. 11–12, available at: dspace.flinders.edu.au/xmlui/bitstream/handle/2328/36712/FJHP30_2014_01_Monroe.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y; Munro, "How illuminating it has been": Matthews, McKenna and their Biographies of Manning Clark', in Philip Payton (ed.), *Emigrants & Historians: Essays in Honour of Eric Richards*, Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2016, pp. 98–131 (text), 169–75 (endnotes), specifically p. 174 n.75, available at: honesthistory.net.au/wp/wp-content/uploads/Munro_MatthewsMcKenna.pdf.

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

32 Ryan, 'Manning Clark', p. 189.

which ‘had put him on the map’.³³ Indeed, as early as 1974 Clark was described as ‘the best *guru* in the business’.³⁴ Ryan was also a public figure, although fairly minor compared with Clark, and of different ilk. He did not give public addresses to the masses. But Ryan still placed himself in the public gaze via the print media and had done so since at least the early 1980s. Like Clark, his public interventions were integral to his being.

What follows is the first systematic and extended attempt to get to the bottom of the Ryan–Clark controversy, and to trace its broader cultural significance. In doing so, I take to heart the sentiment expressed in Ryan’s (spurious) claim that ‘It is perfectly amazing how seldom one can actually bring a Clark fan to engage on any point of detail in his works’.³⁵ In that spirit, although I could hardly be described as ‘a Clark fan’, I have gone through Ryan’s attack on Clark and the replies to his critics on a pretty much point-by-point basis. I take a leaf out of Ryan’s book by confronting him on his own terms—that is to say, by means of an old-fashioned, if you like, empirical approach that tests the evidence and scrutinises Ryan’s factual accuracy, or lack thereof, and the validity of his representations of *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (what actually happened, or even what *essentially* happened).

In the process, this book is divided into three sections, each with a different purpose. The two chapters in Part 1 (‘Wider Setting’), as the name implies, provide the necessary background on the Ryan–Clark controversy, as well as biographical introductions of Clark and Ryan, and a contextualisation of the History Wars so that readers get their bearings. Part 2 (‘Contention and Dissension’) is intended as a narrative of the controversy—the reactions to Ryan’s initial onslaught in *Quadrant*, Ryan’s vigorous counter-reactions, a dissection of his unoriginality when discussing Clark’s *History* and, by extension, a qualified rebuttal of Ryan’s accusations that Clark was shielded by a complicit historical profession. In these four chapters, interpretation is embedded within the narrative but they are largely descriptive, establishing what happened and offering explanations for the various outcomes. The trio of chapters in Part 3 (‘Ruminations’), by contrast, deal with broader concerns and are thematic and reflective—locating Clark within the context of the Australian

33 Ryan, ‘Manning Clark’, p. 194.

34 Geoffrey Serle, ‘One Man’s Window on Our Past: Manning Clark’s Third Volume’, *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 33, no. 1, 1974, pp. 86–88, specifically p. 86.

35 Ryan, ‘A Reply to my Critics’, p. 217.

History Wars; assessing whether his influence on Paul Keating's thinking was as great as alleged at the time (it wasn't); tracing the migration of the Ryan–Clark controversy to England; examining Ryan's motives for his attack on Clark, which are sometimes hard to pin down; assessing the role of *Quadrant* in the controversy and its continued attacks on Clark in the years that followed and the magazine's role in the History Wars generally; and finally a summation of Ryan's culpable and duplicitous representations and what these say about him as a credible witness to history.

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