

An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark

Review Number:

1253

Publish date:

Thursday, 17 May, 2012

Author:

Mark McKenna

ISBN:

9780522856170

Date of Publication:

2011

Price:

£57.95

Pages:

800pp.

Publisher:

Meigunyah Press of Melbourne University Publishing

Place of Publication:

Melbourne

Reviewer:

Doug Munro

even from his mid-twenties, he was a relentless self-promoter, a writer possessed of an inner conviction to succeed and an overwhelming hunger to be heard (p. 226)

Manning Clark (1915-91) was a prolific historian of Australia whose *oeuvre* includes his epic six-volume *A History of Australia* (1962-87), *A Short History of Australia* (1963 and subsequent editions) and the two volumes of *Select Documents in Australian History* (1950, 1955). An historian's scholarly output may prompt an austere intellectual biography, but to warrant a full-dress biography requires being more than an historian *pur et simple*. One must have a broader public reputation, preferably a fraught private life (and to have it well documented) and a nose for controversy. By any definition Manning Clark had these attributes, and more. Appointed in 1949 to the chair of history at Canberra University College (which was later incorporated into the Australian National University), he championed the cause of Australian historiography and confirmed his reputation as a wayward spirit. A larger than life individual, he was uplifting to some, infuriating to others, and both of these things to many. He wrote for a wider audience than his fellow academics. Successive volumes of his *History of Australia* sold in their tens of thousands but were generally dismissed by the historical profession. His interventions in the political domain drew the wrath of the political right and he suffered posthumous denigration unparalleled in the Australian context. Little wonder that Clark was a talking point during and after his lifetime, and that so much has been written about him.

Mark McKenna's biography of Clark is detailed, and weighing in at over 700 pages of text it would have to be the most substantial biography of an historian yet written. Far more than size, however, *An Eye for Eternity*

is notable for innovative and experimental features. It does not commence with the conventional opening chapter on family background and upbringing. Rather, Manning Clark is introduced through a discussion of his memorable speaking voice – ‘a strange mixture of vulnerability and strength’ – whose ‘melodious timbre’ drew people in. I do not remember it quite that way, recalling instead a softly spoken man and no more, but it transpires that Clark’s voice had a startling effect on many people.(1) McKenna’s initial discussion of the speaking voice leads on to other matters – his cultivated persona, his contrived demeanor, his disciplined writing routines, his early epilepsy, the nervous behaviours, his self-consciousness and self-centredness, his desire to leave his mark as a writer. Against Clark’s inner turmoil, which included an extreme sensitivity to criticism, is set his charm, his talent for mimicry and his penchant for ‘self-crafting’, for ‘creating moments’ and for dramatising situations. It is only on the last page of the opening chapter that Clark is mentioned by name, but by then the reader has a very good idea of who he is and what he was like – largely told through the recollections of those who knew him. The tone and the context for the rest of the book are set in this remarkable opening chapter.

The second chapter is just as imaginative and revealing. It is an extended mediation on the Clark archive and McKenna draws the reader into his interactions with his sources. Among other things, McKenna implicitly takes issue with a previous biographer Brian Matthews, who was mistaken in supposing that Clark’s dairies, extending over 50 years, are ‘unvarnished and unguarded’, containing ‘not the slightest suggestion of ... refining’.(2) In contrast to the notion that the diaries may be taken ‘as the utterance of the man behind the mask’, McKenna points out ‘the chasm between the dark despairing and often self-pitying man found in his diaries and the mischievous, affectionate, witty theatrical stirrer that so many recall’ (p. 37). Above all, Clark lived to be remembered, no matter what the cost to others, and to that end he assembled and manicured a huge archive: ‘Clark spend almost as much time documenting himself, as he did documenting Australia’s past’ (p. 704). It recalls Anthony Eden’s obsession with the verdict of history, which was such that he not only wrote two volumes of memoirs, but carefully preserved and organised his private papers, dictated ‘notes for my biographer’ and selected Sir John Wheeler-Bennett, a personal friend, as his biographer-in-waiting.(3) Clark was also given over to such unhealthy impulses. He too tried to direct his future biographer with notes and written instructions, sometimes playfully, to the extent that McKenna often felt that he was ‘wrestling’ with Clark over the control of the project (pp. 41, 703).

The Clark Papers at the National Library of Australia run into almost 200 archival boxes and there is additional material at Manning Clark House (the former family home). The fact that the bulk of the archival material is located in Canberra, and the fact that Clark spend most of his life in the same city, at least meant that the actual research was confined largely to the one place – unlike Jim Davidson’s recent biography of another Australian historian, the wandering scholar W. K. Hancock (*A Three-Cornered Life*), the research for which involved visits to 36 archival repositories spread across four different countries.(4)

In short, biographers of historians are starting to go beyond the predictable paths of the stereotypical monograph and be more inventive, imaginative and experimental, in the best senses of these terms. The exemplars are Jim Davidson’s *A Three-Cornered Life* and Mark McKenna’s *An Eye for Eternity*.(5)

McKenna the biographer proceeds from certain premises. Like Davidson, he makes it clear that biography does not entail putting someone in the dock: ‘Biography’s purpose is to lay things out ... and to do so in a way which is always fair and sympathetic to the person as can be possible’.(6) Indeed, both authors strive not for advocacy on behalf of their respective subjects but for fairness – to people, to situations and to the evidence. McKenna clearly does not see it as his job to ‘rescue’ Manning Clark’s reputation. Neither is it a hatchet job, although there is a much in the book that is deeply unflattering to Clark. An early example concerns Clark, as a postgraduate student at Oxford in the late 1930s, bombarding his wife Dymphna, who was engaged in her own studies in Germany, with a succession of over-wrought letters that amount to moral blackmail – fawning, maudlin, groveling letters, placing his needs above all else, demanding that she do his bidding as though creation revolved around his concerns. As McKenna says, ‘He could not bear to be without her and yet he seemed deaf to her needs; she kept asking for breathing space, for time to complete her studies; he kept pleading for marriage, threatening total collapse if she failed to oblige or even suggest a small delay’ (p. 151). And he got his way, pushing her into marriage earlier than she wanted, prevailing on

her to abandon her studies and come to England, and finally in returning to Australia to escape the European war. Everything was about him and for him.

Biography is not a popularity poll and I did wonder that I might have been over-reacting to Clark's self-possession until a friend – himself the biographer of an historian – volunteered the information that 'the further I get into [*An Eye for Eternity*] the more I dislike the man, dreadful, dreadful'. As one gets ever deeper into the book it becomes clear that the obsessive self-centredness is all of a piece with the rest of Clark's life. A problem that would haunt their long marriage was that Dymphna, with her feet more firmly on the ground, was unable to match Clark's emotional intensity.

The same elements of show pony and drama queen reveal themselves in his desire to write Australian history of a different kind, and his reactions to criticism of his work. In 1938, Clark announced to Dymphna that he felt certain that he could 'write something some day on Australian history' and that he would approach the task with insight and originality. He went on to say 'I believe quite passionately that Australia is a "weird" country and that its weirdness has never been portrayed before except in landscape painting. Australia is virgin soil in this respect & I feel something can be done about it' (pp. 145–6). Full marks for the audacious ambition to supersede what had gone before and a vision how to go about it – and at the tender age of 23. But his reasoning at another level might set alarm bells ringing. As Clark confided to his notebooks, in 1943, 'The confession must be made ... my motive is to impress, vulgarly, to play to the gallery. It will satisfy my ego to produce a work which will bring publicity to me' (p. 221). He liked to think that he 'discovered' and 'uncovered' Australian history and that the 'historical map of Australia was almost a blank' before he came along, but McKenna is having none of that (p. 250).

So how did he go about the twin tasks of enlarging his ego and dilating on the 'melancholy weirdness' of Australia? Far from being in the thrall of Rankean empiricism, his ambition was to write a sort of history that would find 'higher truths' and 'inner meaning' and explore the mystery in the heart of things. His role models were not his mentors and predecessors, whom he regarded as having 'betrayed' Australian history (p. 145), but Gibbon and Carlyle, and he sought to write epic narratives of their sort and by that means 'to write Australia's story'. Clark was also inspired by two fellow Australians, the artist Sydney Nolan and the novelist Patrick White. But what really kindled his imagination were the writings of D. H. Lawrence and, even more so, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who were the 'abiding constants' of Clark's life (p. 281).

He saw himself as 'a creative writer', an artist rather than a scholar. He aspired to write 'literature', and to write history that displayed 'delicacy of feeling, grace of bearing, and shades of emotion and sentiment' (p. 441). He saw his audience as the wider reading public rather than other academics, although he craved the latter's approval. Tellingly, his 1954 inaugural lecture, which provocatively denounced his forebearers, appeared in an anthology of Australian writing rather than being conventionally published as a pamphlet or a journal article. Although often seen as a 'nationalist' historian, Clark stressed the cultural and intellectual inheritance of England, and the theme of his first four volumes of the *History* pivoted on the interactions of Catholicism, Protestantism and the Enlightenment in the harsh Australian environment.

The vision was sufficiently compelling for the *History* and his *Short History* to clock up half a million sales by 1988 (pp. 463, 615). Clark wanted to sit back and lap up the adulation, but the Australian historical profession as a whole was unenamoured. As well as multitudinous factual errors and an over-wrought writing style, there were dissatisfactions at lack of context and scant attention to important themes. In the same way, Clark claimed to be present on important occasions when actually he was somewhere else. It didn't happen once but several times, and this from someone who kept diaries and who could easily have checked. It was more than carelessness, and far more a matter of couldn't care less. Many felt that his interpretations far outran the evidence and that he added another dimension to poetic licence. Where did insight begin and fantasy end? He mixed quotations with his text and his footnotes; they and the resulting 'polyvocal' voice are often impossible to decode (p. 461–2). As well, Clark projected his personal self into his narrative – in other words, another expression of Clark's self-absorption – so it is little wonder that Michael Cathcart had difficulty when condensing Clark's *History* to a single volume, until he 'realised it was about him' (p.459). Many colleagues were forgiving, up to a point, making allowances for the scale and

vision of the work whilst still deploring the mistakes and distortions (pp. 466, 599). Nor did it help that Clark mocked fellow historians for being uninspired 'Dry-as-Dusts' and disparaged the academy while at the same time drawing his salary *and* authority from his senior university position.

Although sloppy and provocative, Clark reacted badly to criticism, privately whimpering and publicly lashing out. As Clark warned, 'Whoso attacks my [work] is undermining my deepest self' (p. 444). On one occasion, when errors were pointed out verbally and in private, he put his arm around his interlocutor and said: 'My dear boy – does that matter? What's important is to have something to say' (p. 544). But he was seldom so benign and McKenna provides a harrowing account of how Clark intimidated most of his critics into public abstinence (pp. 444–52). I don't think Clark was quite so successful in spiking the cannons, at least from Australianists (7), but McKenna is surely right in regretting that the lack of proper evaluation by colleagues of later volumes of the *History*. By that time – the 1980s – Clark was a public figure on behalf of the political left and in the forefront of the Australian 'history wars'. The task of assessing his historical work went by default to non-historian conservatives, 'some of whom were little more than right-wing ideologues'. What small chance might have remained for nuanced public debate on Clark's work and on his vision for Australia was lost beyond repair, 'and [the country's] intellectual culture was the poorer for it' (p. 600).

An Eye for Eternity is also a portrait of a marriage, and Dymphna emerges as definitely the better half (as she does in the earlier biography by Mathews). Capable and resourceful, she held the household together. She was homemaker and mother of six children. From the early stages of marriage she is she is described by McKenna as his 'muse, lover and wife, [and] also his intellectual sounding board, his laundry woman, his editor and his typist' (p. 225). What would he have done without her? The short answer is: a good deal less than he did. And he showed scant gratitude. She had to put up with his infidelities, both low grade and full blown. She left him on more than one occasion and had a packed suitcase at the ready. Matthews has it that Dymphna always returned because her chosen path was 'to keep the family as secure and united as possible'. McKenna offers another dimension – her commitment to Clark's great project, his *History of Australia* – and he doubts whether Clark could have done it without her assistance and restraining hand. In many ways they were a mismatch, both emotionally (see pp. 345, 372) and intellectually. A fundamental difficulty on the intellectual front was that Dymphna had a different understanding of history; 'She valued traditional scholarly principles ... above and beyond artistic expression' (p. 465) and although she constantly saved him from himself he greatly resented her interventions and poured his 'petulant' feelings into his diary. This was just one of the back stories of Clark's *History*.

After Clark's death, Dymphna read his diaries and was aggrieved as well as grieved by the sustained outpourings of abusiveness and negativity towards her over half a century: the diaries were 'a midden of his dissatisfactions with his wife' (p. 159). Although a private person and publicly undemonstrative, she ensured that her correspondence with Manning, stretching over 53 years, would be preserved. Whereas Manning wanted *his* story told, Dymphna ensured that her side of proceedings would not be shouted down by default. Her voice would be heard through her own letters – a duet, if a discordant one, rather than Manning in full solo flight. This meant for McKenna an extraordinary access to the private life of the couple, and into the private lives of each, to that extent *An Eye for Eternity* is almost as much a biography of Dymphna as it is of Manning.

Just as the *History* 'became something of a serialised public drama' in the daily press (p. 82), so did it cause ongoing dramas with its publisher. This is the other back story of Clark's *History*. The repeated problems with his manuscripts drove the people at the Melbourne University Press to distraction, not least the Director, Peter Ryan. He got his revenge two years after Clark's death with a vicious and out-of-the-blue attack on both Clark's character and historical output, in the conservative journal *Quadrant*. There was much truth in Ryan's allegations, which eventually spread over three *Quadrant* articles, but his tone and his very motivations were just cause for offence. In particular, if Ryan had felt that way for so long, then why had he not confronted Clark during his lifetime rather than ambushing him in a series of posthumous attacks? And why, during Clark's lifetime, did Ryan sneakily attempt to arrange hostile critiques of his Clark's work (p. 597)? And this from someone who described Clark as a 'hypocrite'. Ryan claimed that Clark's *History* was

‘a tidy little earner’ and that his Board of Management would hardly have countenanced the ditching of its best selling author. A more plausible explanation is that ‘Ryan lost respect for Clark at the same time he saw him become a hero of the Labor Left’ (p. 690). His resentments continued to fester and finally overflowed. As early as 1994 Ryan hoped ‘never to write another word about Manning Clark’, but like a deranged Boswell has clung on grimly, seldom passing up an opportunity to continue sniping from the wings.

Clark as a head of department was a careless administrator, and neither was he an engaged postgraduate supervisor. But he did have the uncanny knack as being his own talent scout and appointing good teachers. He was also, until late in his university career, an inspiring teacher. This facet needs to be stressed in the light of Alistair Davidson, a former Clark student, who claimed in a letter to the *London Review of Books* that its reviewer of *An Eye for Eternity* had ‘failed to pick up on a huge lacuna’, namely that McKenna had failed to ‘discuss Clark’s extraordinary talents as a teacher’.⁽⁸⁾ It is a good rule of thumb not to comment on a book that one has not read. Simply because the reviewer does not mention Clark’s teaching should not be taken to mean that the book doesn’t either. In fact, *An Eye for Eternity* is unusual for a biography of an historian in that considerable space is devoted to Clark the teacher, and in terms that endorse Davidson’s positive description – a 20-page chapter that deals largely with his teaching in Canberra, and elsewhere concerning Clark’s earlier teaching in Devonshire, Geelong and Melbourne.

I have yet to find a better thumbnail summation than the description of Clark as a ‘pitiable, floundering human being’, adding that ‘he was also formidable, outrageous, eccentric, inspiring and at times a man of mesmerising appeal’.⁽⁹⁾ Although only too aware of Clark’s shortcomings, McKenna told an interviewer that he still retained an ‘extraordinary affection’ for the man, despite all the exasperations in writing his life.⁽¹⁰⁾ In that same interview McKenna had praise for the artistic side of Clark’s historical output – his sensitivity to place, his attunement to sound as well as to the environment, the wonderful set pieces, his engagement with the emotional lives and inner conflicts of his subjects, even if Clark was often projecting his own emotions into other people’s lives. Clark was also before his time in being aware, in the mid-1950s, that the changing geopolitical environment required a greater Australian engagement with Asia (pp. 350–8). It is clearly Clark the public figure from the early 1970s, debating Australia’s direction and future, that evokes McKenna’s real admiration.

At this point that I am reminded of Robert Skidelsky’s comments on Ben Pimlott’s biography of Hugh Dalton (who also kept revealing diaries), that ‘The tension in the book arises quite simply from the fact that Dalton was a “shit” who was also, in many ways, an admirable public man’.⁽¹¹⁾ McKenna readily concedes that Clark’s friends were disturbed that one motivation for his public interventions was to play to the gallery, not to mention the dire effects his role as public prophet had on the final two volumes of the *History*, which became ever more polemical. It is also the case that many on the political right loathed Clark, whose eccentricities of manner and utterance (for example, referring to the long preceding period of conservative government as ‘the years of unleavened bread’) were bound to antagonise his opponents. Paradoxically, he craved the establishment’s approval just as he had yearned for the endorsement of the academy. At a time of great national debate he aligned himself to the Labor Party, flew his colours at full mast and espoused the cause of republican nationalism. My only qualm about *An Eye for Eternity* is that it is clear enough what Clark’s vision for Australia was but not the results of his proselytising (see pp. 614–15). Granted that is probably impossible to disentangle Clark’s contribution to the national debate on nationhood and identity from those of the other participants. Yet, for all the time and effort he put into his public role, and for all the sales of his books, the extent to which Clark might it have changed Australians’ perceptions of themselves remains unclear.

In all, *An Eye for Eternity* is an outstanding achievement and ranks amongst the very best of the growing corpus of biographies of historians. The various elements and requirements are orchestrated into perfect harmony – or in literary terms, a coherent and compelling whole – and compellingly written. It is un-Clarkian in its fidelity to accuracy and impels admiration for the sheer extent of the research, both archival and interviewing. Not least, classical music was one of Clark’s great loves and McKenna brings to bear and informed musical appreciation. There is the Olympian scale of the enterprise. There is ample contextualisation but without the backdrop overwhelming the text. Only occasionally is the detail excessive

– such as mentioning the purchase of a packet of Minties at the New South Wales township of Gundagai (p. 302) – but the narrative moves quickly despite the size of the book and the level of detail. The controlled inventiveness of the earlier chapters is suggestive for biographers generally.

Clark tended to present a tragic view of the world but this biography contains an element of exquisite irony. Clark wanted his biography told above all else, no matter what the collateral damage. He left notes for his biographer designed to lead to his own depiction of events and his own perceptions of the supporting cast. But would he have been gratified by *An Eye for Eternity*? Given Clark's desire to control the narrative of his life and his intolerance of criticism it is probable that he would have hated reading this biography, and McKenna says as much in noting that 'when it comes to writing Clark's life, I'd rather him dead than alive' (p. 23). All this is to say that McKenna won the metaphorical wrestling match. The book that Clark might have hoped for would not be worth reading.

Notes

1. A sampling of Clark's voice is available in 'An Eye for Eternity, Mark McKenna – biography of Manning Clark' (presented by Bill Brown), ABC South East NSW radio programme, 23 September 2011 <<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/08/08/3288537.htm> [2]> [accessed 19 March 2012]. By way of disclosure, I hardly knew Manning Clark, whom I met on no more than six occasions between 1969 and 1991. Although I was technically a student in his Department of History at the Australian National University in 1972–3, I was housed across the campus in the Department of Pacific History, and the extent of our interaction during those two years was a single casual conversation. On the other side of the equation, I arranged to have material sent to Mark McKenna from Wellington (see p. 753, n. 30), and we have subsequently corresponded and commented on each other's work. We have yet to meet, although this is imminent, and I did not tell him that I was writing this review.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Brian Matthews, *Manning Clark: A Life* (Sydney, 2008), p. 456. The reasons for keeping diaries, such as J. C. Beckett's being 'primarily a spiritual account book', are crucial to interpreting them. Alvin Jackson, 'J.C. Beckett: politics, faith, scholarship', *Irish Historical Studies*, 38, 130 (2002), 129–50. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. David Dutton, *Anthony Eden: A Life and Reputation* (London, 1999), pp. 15–16.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Jim Davidson, *A Three-Cornered Life: The Historian WK Hancock* (Sydney, 2010), 578–83.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Jim Davidson, 'Bouncing on the trampoline of fact: biography and the historical imagination', *Australian Book Review* (July–August 2010), 42–5; Doug Munro, 'Biographies of historians – or, the cliographer's task', *Australian Historical Studies* (special issue on 'Biography and Life-Writing'), 41, 1 (2012), 11–27.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Mark McKenna, in *Local Conversations with Richard Fidler*, 20 June 2011

<<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/06/20/3248206.htm> [3]> [accessed 19 March 2012].

[Back to \(6\)](#)

7. For example, see the review of volume three of the *History* by Michael Roe, in *Historical Studies* (Melbourne), 16, 63 (1974), 306–8.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Alistair Davidson, 'Get out of the foothills' (letter), *London Review of Books*, 22 March 2012, 6, referring to Ross McKibbin, 'Cursing and breast-beating', *London Review of Books*, 23 February 2012, 32–3.[Back to \(8\)](#)

9. Peter Cochrane, review (of Matthews, *Manning Clark*), in *The Age* (Melbourne), 15 November 2008. [Back to \(9\)](#)
10. Making History: Mark McKenna on Manning Clark' (public interview with Michael Cathcart), Wheeler Centre, Melbourne, 6 June 2011 <<http://wheelercentre.com/videos/video/making-history-mark-mckenna-on-manning-clark/> [4]> [accessed 20 March 2012].[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. Robert Skidelsky, 'Hugh Dalton' (1985), in Skidelsky, *Interests and Obsessions* (London, 1999), p. 422.[Back to \(11\)](#)

Other reviews:

London Review of Books

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n04/ross-mckibbin/cursing-and-breast-beating> [5]

Australian

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/the-long-history-of-manning-clark/story-e6frg8nf-1226045084566> [6]

Wheeler Centre

<http://wheelercentre.com/projects/victorian-premier-s-literary-awards-2011/book/an-eye-for-eternity-the-life-of-manning-clark/> [7]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1253>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/17255>

[2] <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/08/08/3288537.htm>

[3] <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2011/06/20/3248206.htm>

[4] <http://wheelercentre.com/videos/video/making-history-mark-mckenna-on-manning-clark/>

[5] <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v34/n04/ross-mckibbin/cursing-and-breast-beating>

[6] <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/arts/books/the-long-history-of-manning-clark/story-e6frg8nf-1226045084566>

[7] <http://wheelercentre.com/projects/victorian-premier-s-literary-awards-2011/book/an-eye-for-eternity-the-life-of-manning-clark/>