

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

It seems that around twenty years since his death has been a good time to re-evaluate the work, life and times of the historian Manning Clark. Two substantial biographies have appeared recently. In 2008 Brian Matthews gave us a major portrait of Clark, particularly in a literary context, and was the first to reveal some of the contents of his extensive diaries. But it could not be the last word on this extraordinarily complex man who left so many traces and trails of his life both public and private for biographers and scholars to discover. Mark McKenna's fine and comprehensive study was some seven years in the making but it has certainly been worth the wait. It is as riveting and fascinating as its subject and very readable. Not surprisingly it has been shortlisted for prizes and recently won the Premier's Award for Non-fiction at Adelaide Writers Week. (A disclaimer here: I was one of the judging panel).

Clark had a great influence on Australian historical discourse, beginning in the 1940s, as the compiler and editor of accessible original documents of Australian history, then through his magisterial but flawed six volume history of Australia (1962 to 1987), to his last years as a leading public intellectual. Always a figure of note and controversy, in his heyday he was an instantly recognisable figure commenting on the state of Australia and the Australian psyche. But his death saw the inevitable re-evaluation of his contribution. Within two years his publisher, Peter Ryan, denounced his masterwork as full of inaccuracies and errors and something which, astonishingly, Ryan now felt ashamed to have published. Then three years later Clark was 'exposed' by the Brisbane *Courier Mail* as a Soviet agent and recipient of the Order of Lenin (which is rebutted and contextualised in this book). Even in his largely sympathetic biography McKenna explores and unravels Clark's claim to have seen the broken glass in the streets of Bonn in the immediate aftermath of the notorious 'Kristallnacht' in Hitler's Germany. Clark's wife Dymphna did indeed see it, but Clark, arriving weeks later, convinced himself that he had been there too. But the fact remains that Manning Clark is still probably among the two or three best-known Australian historians.

This major work is a very well written and researched biography of a significant Australian – and very complex man. His life and career could be seen as highly successful. His diary, notebooks, and vast accumulation of letters and other items were intended to be the basis for a monumental posthumous biography and in McKenna he has found someone up to the task.

Clark was clearly aware of his power and influence as a teacher, lecturer, commentator, and writer and sustained his positive public image throughout his life. His importance for the study of Australian history is undoubted. As McKenna says, Clark sparked the interest of the post-war generation in Australian history. His book of select documents on the subject became and remains a standard text in schools and universities. It opened the study of Australian history to many people, giving it a significance and academic respectability it had lacked except in limited circles. He put the story of Australia in an international context and in its geographical setting. One of the consequences of Australia being 'inextricably connected to Asia' was that 'White Australia was a phase in Australia's history that had to end lest the country find itself isolated in its own region.' Australian history for Clark was a great struggle between our geographical location and our British heritage and ties to Empire, between Catholic and Protestant, between the concepts of the

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Enlightenment and less embracing realities of frontier settlement, between philistinism and culture.

In all this, McKenna reveals Clark as reflecting a very personal struggle within himself, from his boyhood as the son of an Anglican clergyman to his deep contact with British and European culture and values immediately before World War II, and so to his career in Australia, much of which was spent in the nascent national capital, but nevertheless provincial town, of Canberra, first at the Canberra University College which was part of Melbourne University, and then at the newly established ANU. Not that Clark did not welcome a kind of exile, for he never felt he quite belonged anywhere in particular, but, as McKenna perceptively points out,

his arrival [in Canberra] dovetailed perfectly with his own ambitions. The city was an experiment in creating a national culture and Clark was about to embark on a parallel journey: to write the nation's history, each monumental volume another pillar in the edifice of Australia's identity. (304)

His multi-volumed history was the first since that of G.W. Rusden in 1883. When Volume 1, 'From the earliest times to the age of Macquarie', was published in 1962, it had huge impact. The eminent historian Keith Hancock said that it 'made Australian history now a part of man's spiritual pilgrimage'. It was Australia as a whole of itself without apology, 'the first genuinely postcolonial history' (440).

It is interesting that at this time it was welcomed by conservatives who saw it as moving Australian history from the left wing 'mateship, workingman's paradise on the march towards Labor's light on the hill' version into something more broad and balanced (440). Later of course Clark was seen as the standard-bearer of a certain type of social democratic history that those same conservatives condemned. As each volume appeared Clark's reputation as a prophet increased, flowering during the Whitlam years and later as an inspiration to Paul Keating's brand of nationalism. The history is very much the voice of Clark as McKenna describes it, 'sonorous and logistical, biblical and outlandishly grave – a voice that seems to elevate Australia through style and tone alone.' At the same time his reputation as an historian was diminished by the errors of fact which littered the work and his increasingly eccentric and personal interpretations and speculations. McKenna points out that both at the time and since few historians have sought to engage with his work. Even friends and colleagues were reluctant to review it and some who were close to him felt it was not real historical writing. Colleague John La Nauze, the eminent historian of Australian Federation – and arguably Clark's treatment of the Federal period in volume 5 of his History is the weakest – refused to read it as he said he 'didn't read fiction' (456). Clark was extremely sensitive to criticism and quite vindictive to those who dared to venture it.

Clark assiduously kept and even annotated voluminous notes and personal correspondence throughout his life and kept a diary of his private musings. It is these that give the book its power. McKenna makes it clear that Clark was setting up and preparing his materials for a future biographer, signposting and attempting to influence the way in which he is portrayed. Clark may have hoped to direct the way he was presented, but by his skilled and judicious use of this material McKenna manages to resist the posthumous directions of his subject and provide a true and rounded picture. In the process he shows how and why biographies of prominent persons like Clark should be written. Clark's diaries reveal a totally different person from the confident attractive charismatic public figure and show him as a

man full of self-loathing and spiritual longing and fear. His remarks about his wife and his marriage, read by Dymphna after his death, are sadistically cruel, although it is hard not to see them as contrived. McKenna deals with all this, including his infidelities, insobriety and other moral failings, without sparing his subject.

As the judges said in his citation for the Literary Award,

the picture that emerges of the man and his life is by no means a series of heroic tableaux. There are enough warts to seriously challenge any 'great man' thesis, and McKenna produces not only a definitive portrait of the man but also of the evolving determinedly Australian culture he was part of for the much of the twentieth century.¹

But it must leave open the question of Clark's future place. His monumental 'A History of Australia' is too personal and eccentric to be a point of reference for future scholars; but as a great literary work, and in terms of its influence on our perception not just of Australian history but of the nation and how it was shaped, it will be rediscovered from generation to generation.

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¹ Announcement of Literary Awards, Arts Department, SA Government, March 2012.