

*Ever, Manning. Selected Letters of Manning Clark 1938-1991*, ed. Roslyn Russell, xxii + 552pp, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2008

Probably only the most casual reader of this journal needs to be told that Charles Manning Hope Clark is Australia's most celebrated and controversial historian, with 19 books to his credit including a six-volume *History of Australia*. Well, Manning Clark, who died in 1991, is coming into his own. His *Selected Letters* have been published, as has a biography by Brian Matthews, with a further biography said to be in the finishing lap. He is undoubtedly worth the attention, a familiar image in late 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia, with his beard, hat and worried or ravaged look, and the writer of what Stuart Macintyre has nicely termed a 'vast and idiosyncratic' history of our nation.

There was a lot you could say about him. Walking away from Mannings' funeral with Allan Martin, a fine historian himself and alas now also deceased, I was taken by Allan's perceptive remark that in his writings Manning projected his own sense of a personal fatal flaw on to most historical figures of any consequence. His fatal flaws certainly emerge in the letters.

But be warned. These are only *his* letters, and they present what has to be a one-sided view of the man. Again and again I wondered what the recipients made of some of his outpourings, and what they wrote in reply, if anything. If you want to see how much better an exchange of letters can be, read *Portrait of a Friendship*, the letters that passed between Barbara Blackman and Judith Wright, close friends from young womanhood until Judith's death. They were Manning Clark's contemporaries, and there are references to Judith in a letter or two while Clark was in Harvard in the late 1970s, but no letters.

Manning's letters do not, in my view, allow an equivalent insight. This is not the fault of the editor, but of the author. Set aside what you might call 'business' (what most of our correspondence is about) so much of Manning Clark's correspondence was about his state of mind, his emotions, and his view of the world. He was 'needy' from the beginning. He would write a letter every day to fiancée and then wife Dymphna, but reprove her for not answering at the same rate. But how could you answer some of these letters, other than by saying 'there, there', as to a child?

In a letter to his son Axel, when Clark was in England and Axel in Melbourne, Manning wrote 'all we Clarks suffer at times from despair, from a black melancholy of the soul'. Axel had just turned 21, and received this insight, and the advice to 'Rage, so that in time you can feel the peace settling inside of you', because Dad had heard that he was depressed. Manning plainly gave his kids a lot of advice, and they seem to have coped. But that sense of despair and black melancholy certainly appears again and again in the letters.

I once wrote that academics often have large and fragile egos because they can never be sure of the worth of their own work — unlike, say, a tennis player who can see where he or she is on a sensible and objective ranking in terms of relative

success. Manning seems to me to have fitted this description perfectly. He was sure of his own high worth, but it was important to him that others concurred, so that any criticism of his historical writings, especially the successive volumes of the *History*, was akin to poison. He wrote, 'everything I do seems to please some very much and rouse savage hatred and anger to others', a year or so after the publication of the first volume of the *History*. Anyone who writes about what he called 'the great questions of the human heart' will receive criticism. Some of it, since we are not perfect, is justified, some of it is misconceived, and some of it is irrelevant. Good advice is not to read reviews of your own work. If you can't do that, learn to shrug. Manning never did.

Is it worth reading? Yes, certainly. I learned a lot about someone I knew slightly, admired, and who was helpful to me. I acquired a deeper sympathy for his wife, who had a lot to put up with. As a historian myself, I enjoyed remarks like 'Oxford is passing through a critical period in its history. It is being rapidly commercialised...' He meant the city, rather than the University. And it was written in 1938.

I'll finish with a completely local episode. Manning went off to Canberra High School in November 1949, which then occupied the site and buildings of what is now the ANU School of Art. At that time I was in 1C at CHS, and my father was the Mathematics Master. Manning wrote to Dymphna: 'The building, of course, is very good. I was not quite so impressed with the staff, rather lower middle class heavily blinkered types without any of the graces or the refinements of life.' Heaven knows what my father and mother, both university graduates, would have thought of that judgment!

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