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Lies and Silences

by Nadia Wheatley

I should begin by explaining that I never set out to be a biographer, and nor did I have some sort of burning desire to discover what made Charmian Clift tick. I inherited the project from Clift's elder son, Martin Johnston, with whom I had lived Sydney and Greece from 1972 to 1978. During that time, Martin had often mentioned his parents -- always in an affectionate and admiring way -- but his comments had invariably been prompted by some situation. For instance, there might be something on TV about a Hindu guru practising levitation (this was the seventies, after all) and Martin would say, 'My mother was always firmly of the belief that when she was a little girl she had been able to fly.' Martin would also sometimes sing songs or recite poems or relate anecdotes that he had learned from his family, and occasionally his opinion or comment would be prefaced by the phrase 'Mum always used to say...' or 'Dad always used to say...' For example: 'Mum always used to say that she thought you probably got the prizes first, and had to work for them afterwards.' Or: 'Dad always used to say that the world was divided into players and spectators.'

All of this, of course, built up a picture of Charmian Clift and George Johnston. But I have to stress two things. First, during those eight years I had absolutely no idea that I would ever write about Martin's parents. Thus I did not try to remember what he told me, let alone make notes. Second,

Martin and I never actually discussed or tried to analyse his parents and family life, and nor did I ever ask him any personal questions about his childhood or his parents.

By 1980, we were no longer together, but I still regarded Martin as my closest male friend. One day, when he came to my place for lunch, we started talking about the problem he was having because he had received a couple of Literature Board grants to write a memoir of his parents, but he was finding the work too painful. Meanwhile, my problem was that nobody wanted to publish the novel that I had written. Although I had a postgraduate degree in history, I had just spent five years reinventing myself as a fiction writer, and I was determined not to get a job in a university.

At what stage of that long afternoon did Martin and I get the crazy notion that we could both solve our work problems by combining them? All I know is that, by the time he left, we had a piece of paper on which we had a plan for a collaborative biography of Charmian Clift and George Johnston.

Our collaboration never progressed beyond that one page. Within a couple of years Martin had pulled completely out of the project, but for some reason he wanted *me* to keep on writing a biography of Charmian Clift, and whenever I said I wanted to abandon the job, he'd say: 'Oh, but Nard...' and I would give in. It was always hard to say no to Martin.

I should emphasise, however, that while Martin continued to pressure me into doing the book, he took no further part in it. Not only did he never read a word of any draft, but we never discussed what form the biography would take. Nor did Martin give me information, except for a short taped interview in an ABC studio, and an untaped interview in a restaurant. Also, despite my friendship both with Martin and with Charmian and George's younger son, Jason Johnston, it was always clear that in no way was this

work to be presented as an 'authorised' biography. Nor was it to be a hagiography. As a historian, I would not have agreed to the job unless I believed I had authorial freedom.

I have borrowed the title of this essay, 'Lies and Silences', from the novel *According to Mark* by British author, Penelope Lively. In this book a youngish biographer, named Mark Lamming, is writing a biography of an eminent and dead biographer, called Gilbert Strong. This fictional set-up allows the novelist to discuss some of the challenges involved in writing biography. In the following passage — which purports to be part of an essay by the fictional biographer, Strong — Penelope Lively points out a significant difference between the genre of the novel and the genre of biography:

The novelist recounts as much of what happened as is appropriate or pertinent. He leaves out what is either unnecessary (to the plot and to the theme) or what would distract. In other words, the silences of the novel are not lies but rejection of extraneous material...

The biographer does something entirely different. He is aware of the existence of a 'true' account of what happened to his subject; everything conspires to conceal this from him. His job is to pursue this so-called 'truth' — which is itself unattainable. His lies and silences are therefore his areas of failure.

This is a useful distinction between some of the intentions of these two genres, it also provides a convenient focus for some of the issues I confronted in writing the biography of Charmian Clift.

In regard to my subject, there were a great many lies and silences. After all, she herself wrote that

All my family were tremendous liars and inventors and embroiderers... It didn't seem like lying exactly, but just rearranging and augmenting a little to get a richer or more dramatic or more unusual effect.

This area of lies and embroidery is, of course, part of the myth of Charmian Clift, which had to be unraveled before I could get at the facts or the 'truth' of the story.

A major difficulty was that Charmian Clift had already been portrayed as the fictional character, Cressida Morley, in George Johnston's autobiographical trilogy, particularly the second novel, *Clean Straw for Nothing*. In that fictionalisation, the author had structured his authorial point of view through the technique of breaking the chronological account, then shuffling the pieces into an apparently random order, and leaving certain large and significant gaps. Of course, Johnston was perfectly entitled to do this in a work of fiction. Indeed, this is exactly the sort of thing to which Penelope Lively was referring when she wrote that 'the silences of the novel are not lies but rejections of extraneous material'.

This problem with this, however, from the point of view of Clift's biographer, is that most readers take Johnston's trilogy — *My Brother Jack*, *Clean Straw for Nothing* and *A Cartload of Clay* — to be a cross between a journal and an autobiographical memoir. I knew that, because of this, many readers would come to a biography of Clift with a view that was shaped by the lies and silences of fiction — and a view which was already jumbled, fragmentary and highly selective.

This problem was compounded by a series of legends of the life of Clift and Johnston, which in some cases had been started by the authors themselves — and which they themselves sometimes believed — but which had spun out of control in the three decades since their deaths.

Charmian Clift's depiction of her childhood is one example of a story which the author herself believed, but which I believe to be a myth or lie. In account after account — both in the non fiction (or what purports to be non-fiction) of the essays and travel books and in pages and pages of unfinished drafts of autobiographical fiction — Charmian Clift wrote that she had the most perfectly happy childhood imaginable, with the most perfectly happy family. A recurring image of Clift's childhood anecdotes was of herself at the centre of a crowd of happy playmates. Similar accounts were also given to friends and acquaintances, and to journalists doing interviews. Indeed, in the untaped interview with me, Martin had commented that in the last months of her life, his mother had been inclined to regale perfect strangers with accounts of her wonderful childhood.

The following passage is a written version of the idyll, produced around the early 1950s in an unfinished and unpublished autobiographical novel titled *Greener Grows the Grass*. Here Clift's alter ego, at this time called Christine Morley, is a young woman in her early twenties. As she sits with her lover, Justin, in a bar, she tries to explain to him how her 'memories of childhood were permeated with the smell of the creek' that ran beside the cottage where the family lived on the outskirts of a country town:

I suppose I always think of [my childhood] because it was the only time in my life I was really happy -- without complications. I can't remember being aware of injustices or inequalities, although I suppose I must have been, because I got myself the reputation of being a stormy petrel. But as far as I can remember I thought my father was the cleverest man in the world, and my mother the most understanding mother, I was in perfect accord with my brother [...] and I *worshipped* [my elder sister]. I used to feel sorry for the kids in town because they couldn't possibly have such a wonderful family as mine, and because they didn't have the creek and the beach. The town kids had to swim at the town surf beach and they

had nowhere at all where they could paddle canoes, even if their fathers were clever enough to make them... God, Jus, the smell of that creek, and the paddles swish-swishing, and the kids screaming and the dogs yelping.

In all the early drafts of the biography, written over a period of about twelve years, I dutifully typed in long quotations such as that one, and wrote about Charmian Clift's idyllic Kiama childhood and her loving and wonderful family. Meanwhile, I also collected anecdotes from various Kiama people who had been Charmian's playmates and neighbours. They told a rather different story, of a bossy and solitary little girl who didn't know how to play properly, who always wanted to be leader in the games and who didn't share her canoe. The neighbours also described the whole Clift family as being alien in the close-knit working class community. They were seen as — the worst of epithets — 'Pommy snobs'. While Charmian's mother was known locally as 'Lady Muck', Charmian's sister was called 'the Duchess'. Despite this sort of evidence, I kept believing Clift's autobiographical account of her happy childhood. This was largely because *she* was so insistent on it, in all her writing and in published interviews with her. However, looking back, I can also see that I had swallowed the myth that Martin had been brought up on, and which he had passed on to me in incidental anecdotes. This was a case in which inside knowledge proved a disadvantage.

Throughout these first twelve or so years of researching and writing the book, I had particular difficulty writing about the childhood of my subject. This infuriated me, and also puzzled me. After all, as well as writing history and biography, I had written a number of children's books. This had given me a fair amount of experience in creating child characters. So why did I keep failing to bring the young Charmian and her childhood alive on the page?

This failure led to major problems in the writing of the latter part of the story. To paraphrase the Jesuits: 'Give me a child to the age of seven, and I've got her for life.' But as my seven-year-old Charmian was strangely unconvincing, the motivations and psychology of my adult Charmian were also problematic.

One morning — I remember it so well — I was sitting in my work room, which at that time was a bungalow separate from the house, and I was typing out a particular sentence Clift had written about her childhood in the essay 'Winter Solstice', which was produced in the last couple of months of the author's life. I had read and typed out this sentence a number of times before, but on this morning I needed again to type these words: 'Isn't it strange how your childhood dogs you and tracks you and will not let you be?'

I got up from my desk, and began to walk to the house to make myself a cup of coffee. As I did so, the words kept repeating themselves in my brain: *Isn't it strange how your childhood dogs you and tracks you and will not let you be?* As I walked through the gate into the garden, the world spun around me, and I was so severely disoriented that I had to put out my hand and steady myself on the gatepost. *Isn't it strange how your childhood dogs you and tracks you and will not let you be?*

In that moment, I knew: that is *not* the statement of someone who has had a blissfully happy and secure childhood. In my experience, people who truly had the sort of sunny country childhood that Clift describes are unable to remember much about it. Further, they rarely talk about their childhood, unprompted. People who remember a great deal about their childhood tend to be people who have suffered an unhappy childhood in a family with some form of dysfunction. *That* is the sort of childhood which 'dogs and tracks' someone.

Still standing at the gate, I thought: if I accept for a moment the hypothesis that Charmian Clift had an *unhappy* childhood and was *insecure* in her family — where does that take me? Instantly, it was as if I had the missing piece of the jigsaw, so that now most of the other pieces could fairly easily slot into place. This psychological framework made sense — not just of the child Charmian, but of the adolescent Charmian, whom the writer Clift described in a short passage of raw first draft text as acting bold and brave and even somewhat promiscuous in order to hide a secret cry of 'Love me love me help me someone'. It made sense of the adult Charmian, who seemed so confident and gregarious but who was extraordinary vulnerable, and who had few intimate friends.

As I went back through all the evidence that had been staring me in the face for so long, I realised that Charmian as a child had herself started to make up and believe a kind of legend about how happy she was. Just as some children invent an imaginary friend, it was as if Charmian had invented a playmate who was her own alter ego — who lived in a parallel universe in which she was happy and popular, and felt utterly safe and loved. So persuasive was this fiction that the real person came to believe that that was how things had really been.

While this fictionalising was a form of survival strategy, this myth-making process was bolstered by the fact that within Charmian's own family, both parents were also involved in mythologising their lives or the lives of their children.

That was the biggest myth — the largest lie — with which I had to deal in the course of researching and writing the biography. But as well as these lies or fictionalisations or fabrications or myths, there were also areas of silence.

Despite seeming to make a great deal of personal revelation in her newspaper columns, Charmian Clift is famous for being elusive and enigmatic. If you have read *Clean Straw for Nothing*, you will remember that the Charmian character, Cressida Morley, is described as having a certain fey or 'away' expression that is characterised as her 'dripping tap look'. While a number of people declared that this fictional characteristic was drawn from life, Martin Johnston, in the taped interview with me, stated that he didn't think anyone, not even his father, was allowed to know his mother's private recesses.

Of course, there is a paradox facing the biographer of an enigmatic or very private subject for, if you make such a person explicable or public, you run the risk of betraying the essence of the character. Even leaving aside the issue of Clift's enigmatic qualities, it was clear from the start that, in regard to the available material, there were a number of gaps in the record. Now, I would remind you again of the warning given by Penelope Lively's fictional biographer, Gilbert Strong: "*A biographer's lies and silences are his areas of failure*".

The problematic nature of this edict was brought home to me when, a couple of years into the project, I wrote a letter to the newspaper asking for information about Charmian Clift, and I received a rather curious reply from a man who had known her in the army. He wrote that she had revealed to him that she had had an illegitimate daughter, named Jennifer, whom she had relinquished for adoption.

At that time — 1983 — adoption records were closed, so there was no way of seeking verification. For a biographer, like any historian, it is difficult to know what to do with information for which there is no documentary proof. Far more importantly, I found myself wondering: what is the ethical thing to do? If Charmian Clift went to great pains to

hide this information from the public, and even indeed from her three legitimate children, did I have the right to reveal it?

The problem got worse when I raised the topic with Charmian's sister, Margaret. I hadn't met Margaret during the time I lived with Martin, but in the early stage of research I had done three taped interviews with her. Subsequently, I had developed a relationship with her that was independent of my professional interest in her sister. As time went on, I would make the odd social call when I was in Sydney; we'd exchange Christmas cards and occasional letters. One day, over a cup of coffee in Margaret's kitchen, with no tape recorder going, I said: 'Tell me -- did Charmian have a child that she relinquished for adoption?' Margaret laughed uproariously and replied: 'I have never heard anything so ridiculous in all my life!' For a while I believed her, but then I came to feel that she was concealing the truth, in order to preserve the reputation of her sister and also of her family. While this was perfectly understandable, it made the ethical problem considerably harder. Could I go into print, saying something that would seriously hurt Margaret, and which would imply that I believed she had lied to me? I didn't know the answer, and it held up my writing for about six years — that is, until Margaret died in early 1990. After that, I decided to write about the illegitimate child, because revealing the truth made more sense of Charmian Clift's subsequent life.¹

All in all, I often felt: Oh to be writing fiction, where you don't have to worry about hurting the feelings of your characters — and where your lies and silences are not indicative of your failure.

¹ It was a year and a half later, in June 1991, that Charmian Clift's first daughter, Suzanne Chick, contacted me after the adoption records were opened up, and told me she had just discovered her identity. By that time, however, my agonising over the ethical issue of revelation was well and truly over.

If those two examples of 'lies and silences' in the life of Charmian Clift caused me years of misdirection and moral dilemma, perhaps the biggest problem facing a biographer is to do with what could be called *foresight*. That is like hindsight, from the other direction. Again, I have borrowed this term from Penelope Lively, who has her character Mark, the young biographer, complain that he contemplates his subject, the eminent dead biographer Strong, with 'the wisdom of foresight'. Mark goes on to say:

A problem for the biographer is this omniscience. We know the narrative sequence. We record our subject's childhood and youth with wisdom of what is to come — we have this god-like advantage over the person of whom we write.

While I find this a brilliant insight into what I believe to be the biographer's main problem, I feel that in this aspect, Penelope Lively does not go far enough. The problem is not just that the *biographer* knows how the story ends, but that the biographer knows that in most cases the *reader* will also come to the story with foresight of the ending.

Just think: when we buy or borrow a novel, we usually do not know what will happen in the story. That's why we want to read it — at least the first time around. We often feel that the book is spoiled if someone tells us the main plot point or the ending. With a biography, however, we usually buy or borrow it precisely because we know the end and/or the main bit of the story, and we want to fill in the other bits. Thus not only the writer but also the *reader* of a biography is all the time inclined to view the subject with an omniscient advantage.

This is the case whether the biography is about someone who lived a long and apparently fulfilled life, or whether the biography is about a subject who died prematurely and apparently without completing her or his life's work. If the subject's death is tragic, that knowledge will loom as a particularly large part of our foresight. And if the tragic form of the death

is the taboo act of suicide, this is particularly the case. People tend to become caught up in wondering about the reasons or the motivation for the death. Thus over the last twenty-one years, when I have mentioned that I have been writing a biography of Charmian Clift, most people have immediately asked: 'Why did she kill herself?' As if that was the single most important fact or issue raised by her life.

The difficulty, therefore, with foresight in this particular case is that — unlike Charmian Clift — *you* most probably begin her story knowing more or less how it will end. Charmian herself, of course, did not know what Lively calls 'the narrative sequence'. She did not live her life from day to day in the knowledge of the end of the story. I have to warn you that, as *readers*, you cannot imaginatively enter into her life unless you dispense with this 'wisdom of foresight'.

A considerable part of my job as a biographer, therefore, is to try to trick you into forgetting what you know. I have to try to make you enter into and live in the present day-to-day moments of Clift's life, so that you suspend your foresight -- so that you give up your god-like advantage.

I have often said that, as far as I am concerned, Charmian Clift's suicide is the *least* significant thing she ever did. By that I mean that it does not tell us very much about her — except about her state of mind on a particular night, and maybe during the preceding six months or so. As she herself wrote: 'A whole human life of struggle, bravery, defeat, triumph, hope, despair, might be remembered, finally, for one drunken escapade'.

In many ways, Clift's death was that drunken escapade. It was like an event from a certain kind of novel, in which suddenly the writer makes the character act out of character, as if to underline the fact that this is just a fiction anyway, and the novelist can do what she damn well pleases.

The meaning of Clift's life is one of hope, of aspiration, of optimism — and indeed of the affirmation of life itself. Charmian Clift

was, in a phrase she often used, a 'Yea-sayer'. Her hope and optimism did not take the naive form of believing that inside every dark cloud is a silver lining. Rather, Clift's aspiration involved political commitment, and striving for a better future. Through the last five years of her life, she worked hard every week as a newspaper columnist to make this a wiser and more tolerant country — to make it the kind of society that she wanted her kids and other mothers' kids to grow up in.

While this discussion has focussed on various legends and lies, I believe that it is ending with truth. In a word — the *life* is the truth of Charmian Clift's life — the life, not the death.

This is the kind of life that is revealed in the following little passage, written on Hydra, shortly after the birth of the author's second son:

Ask nothing of it and the soul retires, the flame of life flickers, burns lower, expires for want of air. Here, in the midst of all our difficulties, life burns high. Though it seems sometimes that we make no progress towards the ideal, yet the ideal *exists*, and our energies are directed towards it.