

High Valley Afterword

Saturday 8 May, 1948, was the third anniversary of VE Day—marking the end of the war in Europe. The front page headlines of the *Sydney Morning Herald* announced British plans for a United Europe Movement, with the visionary aim of sealing the peace, but also American plans to build nearly three thousand new fighter planes, just in case tensions with the Soviet Union turned from Cold to Hot. For Sydneysiders, the real news was that there would be a ten-day wait before beer would be available in the wake of the ten-week Sydney brewery strike. In a prominent position between the beer and the bombers, a bold two-column header announced:

HERALD NOVEL
PRIZES
Husband And Wife
Win £2000

The accompanying article reported that the *Herald's* second annual literary competition had been won by ‘Mr George H. Johnston, a Sydney journalist, and his wife, Charmian’ for the novel *High Valley*, described as ‘the collaborated work of husband and wife’. The £2000 prize money would have been enough to buy a suburban house (if George and Charmian had happened to be suburban-house-buying kind of folk), but the real value of the award was that it brought the winners to the attention of the critics and the reading public of their own country, and assured them of publication overseas.

It was unfortunate, however, that these two writers made their first appearance as novelists together, and in such a blaze of publicity, for they tended to be portrayed for the rest of their lives as two people performing under a common pantomime horse costume. This was particularly wretched for the one who was seen as providing the rump.

‘I was twenty-four and suddenly found myself a literary celebrity, except that most

people didn't really think I'd had much to do with it,' Charmian Clift later commented. And Johnston concurred that 'For a long time there was this sort of legend that I really only put her name on it.'

Although there remain no drafts of this work, both external and internal evidence show how little truth there is to this legend. But before we come to that, we need to take in the back-story of the relationship between these co-authors.

The starting point was an evening in May 1945 in the opulent surroundings of the Hotel Australia, Melbourne, where a twenty-one-year-old lieutenant, whose war-work involved editing an in-house magazine for the Ordnance Corps, was taken by a mutual acquaintance to meet Australia's best-known war correspondent, back in town for a brief leave. The lieutenant was a small town girl from the south coast of New South Wales, who had just had her first short story published and had decided that 'There wasn't going to be anything else, ever ever, except being a writer.' The journalist was a Melburnian from a lower middle class family, who at a prodigious age had pushed his way onto the staff of the *Argus* newspaper, bastion of the city's establishment. Now thirty-three, he had travelled the world, from New Guinea to New York, and had published half a dozen 'war books' (accounts of boats and battles) as well as a potboiler crime novel that he would prefer not to mention. Although Charmian had the poise conferred by her beauty, she was privately lacking in self confidence to an extraordinary degree. On this occasion, she was also stage-struck with awe at the prospect of meeting George Johnston.

Charmian: I had my pips polished and my hat on straight and everything. And we waited and waited and waited...

George: In the meantime, I'd met a couple of Army nurses, nice girls I had known in the Middle East. We got on the grog a bit—it was that sort of time. I took these two nurses to the Hotel Australia for dinner...

Charmian: He came in, an army nurse on each arm, all drunk. He looked at our table —

George: And there was Charmian and my mate. I realised the gaffe I had made and went over to apologise.

Charmian: He said, 'Excuse me, I'm as drunk as a son of a bitch.'

It was exactly the sort of opening line calculated to appeal to a girl such as Charmian, and, in the terms of a novel, they should have fallen in love on the spot. In life, however, this was a fleeting war-time encounter, and within a few days, Johnston went off on his next assignment, to China. Although the war in the Pacific was grinding relentlessly on, there was a bit of a gap in the correspondent's itinerary, so he leapt at the offer of a free lift with a US cavalry expedition that was flying to Tibet.

There he spent five weeks travelling by pony in the area of the Ta Hsueh Shan mountain range in the company of an American photographer and a Chinese-Tibetan guide. In the account of this time that he would produce a few months later for his travel book, *Journey Through Tomorrow*, he described a world that had been seen by few people other than the indigenous Tibetans who pastured their flocks of yaks and sheep in the high valley of S-le-t'o:

The valley stretched as far as the eye could see from north to south, linking at its southern end with the long valley of Yulong-she. It was flanked by scarred and rounded hills, the emerald of the grassy lower slopes blending into the drabness of gorse-patches, then into the russet of broken stone, and finally into the whiteness of snowy-powdered summits. Beyond, the icy monsters of the Ta Hsueh Shan glittered like polished crystal in the drenching sunshine. The floor of the valley, carved by rushing streams of melted ice, was ablaze with colour, wildflowers of white, yellow, red and purple bejewelling the thick, lush grass.

In this alpine Shangri-La, George Johnston spent three days in the black *yurt* of T'se Ch'i, head of the Muh Lam clan, where he ate *ku-zeh* and drank *tsamba* and slept on rugs with the headman's family—with T'se Ch'i's 'tall and smiling' wife and his four 'shy, wide-eyed children'.

Journeying on through this remote country, he met the Tulku, or Living Buddha, whom he found affable, scholarly and wise, and although he encountered scores of lesser lamas whom he described as charlatans and avaricious scoundrels, he developed a deep respect for the principles of Buddhism. After almost missing the last plane out of Tibet, Johnston travelled through China to Japan, where he witnessed the horrifying aftermath of the atomic bomb.

In October 1945 the war correspondent returned to Melbourne, where he had a wife and a young child, and to his job at the *Argus*. Like many returned servicemen, he found it difficult to settle back into the humdrum certainties of peace time.

Meanwhile, Lieutenant Clift and her Ordnance Corps publication had come to the notice of Brigadier Sir Errol Knox, the *Argus*'s Managing Director, who had invited her to join the newspaper when the war was over. Although the conflict ended in September 1945, demobilisation was very slow for female service personnel, so it was not until the May of the following year that she was able to take up the offer. On one of her first days at the office, she ran into George Johnston in the lift. 'He blinked vividly,' she later recalled, 'and said an extraordinary thing: "Welcome home", and then bolted out when the lift stopped.'

After this second meeting, George Johnston and Charmian Clift fell instantly and openly in love, creating what a colleague described as 'the *scandale* of the *Argus* building'. Within two months, Charmian Clift was called to Sir Errol Knox's office and summarily dismissed. Declaring that 'This is the last time the woman pays!' Johnston offered his resignation in protest. With his longstanding reputation as the Managing Director's 'Golden Boy', he expected that this would be refused. To his amazement, Knox accepted it without demur. In fact, the affair provided a convenient excuse for getting rid of a journalist whose political views were becoming a problem for the newspaper's conservative political masters.

George Johnston was hardly—in the language of the time—a Red, but he had talked with Mao Tse Tung (as the Chinese leader was then known) as well as with the Living Buddha, and he believed that the only hope for China, in the civil war that was still raging, lay in a Kuomintang defeat. Twenty years later, during the Vietnam years, Clift told a public meeting that immediately after the war Johnston had ‘predicted every damn thing that has happened since’ in Asia:

He talked at clubs and in schools and practically stood on stumps yelling, and he wrote series of articles that didn’t get printed because one of his masters went to such elegant Chinese dinners at the embassy and the articles might offend.

The couple’s joint dismissal from the *Argus* served both to bond them and to give them freedom of movement. Leaving Melbourne behind, they headed north up the coast to Charmian Clift’s parents’ home in Kiama, where they had the ‘honeymoon’ that Johnston was later to describe as ‘our own small vision of Paradise’ in the Lebanon Bay section of *Clean Straw for Nothing*. Lingered on through the summer, it wasn’t until February of the new year that they continued on their way to Sydney, where they planned to start their new life together. They had no employment, no place to stay, and rapidly dwindling savings.

Barely had they arrived when Charmian realised she was pregnant. Unable to scrape together the upfront sum of ‘key money’ (valued at hundreds of pounds) that landlords extorted during this time of the post-war housing shortage, they decided that George would remain in Sydney, get a job, and rent a furnished room in Kings Cross. Charmian meanwhile, would return to the healthy environment of her home town, where George would join her at weekends. With money now an even more pressing problem, George suggested that they should collaborate on a novel. Charmian leapt at

the idea. But—given their very different life experiences —what could they jointly write about?

Barely had they arrived that George would move into a furnished room above a Kings Cross restaurant and get a job in Sydney, while Charmian would go back to the healthy environment of Kiama; George weekends

Of all the enthralling traveller's tales that George had told Charmian, the one she found most fascinating was the story of the five weeks he had spent trekking through Tibet. And with *Journey Through Tomorrow* arriving as proofs at just this time, she was able to read Johnston's written account of this interlude, as well as listen to his stories. Whichever one of the couple came up with the idea of transmuting this material into fiction, it suited them both: the High Valley of the Ta Hsueh Shan mountain range was the absolute antithesis of the suburban flatness of post-war society that these two romantics were bent on escaping.

Neither knew how to write a novel. Despite his track record, Johnston had never produced any serious fiction. Clift had only a couple of short stories to her credit. Describing the writing process twenty years later, the couple recalled that they 'wrote a careful synopsis, wrote a chapter each, and then exchanged ideas and rewrote each other's work if necessary' so that the text was 'continually revised as [they] went along'.

While this is accurate enough, a vital element in the making of the book was the writers' physical isolation from each other for much of the writing process. Although the writers themselves said that this separation caused 'extreme difficulties', it was in fact an advantage. Whereas, in Johnston's words, 'Charmian was a slow, painstaking, very private writer', he 'was very facile and churned out books at the drop of a semi-colon'. (The 35,000 word Tibetan section of *Journey Through Tomorrow* had been produced in an astonishing

nineteen hours.) This kind of speed-writing was infuriating for the slow half of the collaborative team, because it did not allow for an equal input into the creative process.

While this was one of the reasons Clift later withdrew from collaboration, she was able with *High Valley* to make ground during the week, while Johnston was in Sydney. Charmian's sister, Margaret Backhouse, gives a vivid picture of how the couple worked at weekends:

George and Charmian would be sitting at the old deal table, each with a typewriter, going for their lives. George would be typing away, typing away, typing away, almost singing as he's going, typing away, give it a little thought, puffing cigarettes, typing away, typing away.

Charmian would do a little bit, think, tear it up, chuck it in the wastepaper basket, get up and walk around, stalk around, and so on, but when she put it down, it was right. And eventually she'd pass over what she'd written to George.

He'd read it, he'd pass over what he'd written—he'd have *this* much for her to read, but she'd have a little bit like that for him to read, you see. And then they'd put their heads together and say, 'Now what are we going to keep and what are we going to cut? And there might be a stony silence for a while or something, or one of them might say something rude, *but* they'd come together. And it would be, 'All right, we'll do it this way!'

While Johnston's journalistic training caused him to churn out prose as if for an urgent deadline, it also caused him, he said, to 'grab at the immediate idea or the immediate image', thus producing 'a kind of superficial slickness'. Margaret later commented that in the process of writing *High Valley*: 'Charmian used to pull him up, you see, because he was inclined to sort of skim along over the top, when he could have gone a bit deeper.'

George Johnston himself was the first to pay tribute to Clift's role. When the novel won the prize, he stated:

If there is any quality in this book it is the work of my wife. She is responsible for characterisation and emotional content. I was the journalist who provided the substance, she was the artist who provided the burnish.

And in a biographical note for the novel's American publishers he described the collaboration as 'a fair 50-50, I contributing most of the descriptive material as a journalist, she supplying the emotional structure and theme'.

As Margaret remembered this division, Charmian was 'encouraging' George to talk about his time in Tibet, 'and she was taking his descriptions of people and places and all the rest of it, but the people in particular, and *moulding* them into a character'.

In a crucial part of his account of the time he spent in the tiny isolated community of the S-le-t'o valley, Johnston described how struck he had been by the sense of 'warm living and kindness and humanity' of the inhabitants. While he found much of this experience 'strange and barbaric', he also found that, 'So much of it was as familiar as the everyday scenes on an Australian farm.' And in his summing-up of the Tibetan people, he observed:

The curious thing is that when one ... sees them in their daily lives ... they are very little different, except in costume, religion and personal habits, from their counterparts in the world we regard as mundane and dull and orthodox. They have much the same loves and hates, the same passions and the same kindness, the same worries and the same bewilderments, the same curiosities and the same mixtures of courage and cowardice, generosity and avarice, the same primal fear of what to them, and to us, is unknown.

This insight enabled Charmian Clift to draw upon a people and a place that she knew like the back of her hand—and which she could observe as she sat typing on her parents' front veranda.

The settlement at North Kiama, where Charmian Clift had grown up, was comprised of about a dozen cottages scattered along the eastern end of a small lush valley that folded back onto the sheer rise of the Illawarra escarpment. This provided a kind of miniature relief map of the High Valley of S-le-t'o, with its scattering of *yurts*. Similarly, although the inhabitants of this little settlement were quarry workers and their families, these were country folk, just as much as the people whom Johnston had described. Thus in 'moulding' Tibetans such as Dupken the shrewish busybody, Chunor the wheeler-dealer, Dochi the dolt and Lotor the drunk, Clift was able to use local clay.

For the novel's main characters, Charmian turned to her own family. While Muhlam

the headman owes more than his name to T'se Ch'i of Muh Lam—whom Johnston described as 'a picturesquely handsome man with the face and bearing and dignity of a Red Indian chieftain'—Clift's description of his 'massive head . . . the taut moulding of the hard mouth and the flared arrogance of the nose, and the deep-set eyes' could be a pen picture of her father, Sydney Clift. The similarity is more than physical, for Syd was an arrogant man with strong leadership qualities, and he was held in great esteem in the tiny community. As engineer at the local quarry he had been singlehandedly responsible, during the Great Depression, for keeping the quarry going and the local men in work—a provider/protector role akin to that of the headman Muhlam. Similarly, his wife Kelinka is drawn from T'se Ch'i's wife, but there is in her quiet warmth and patient acceptance much of Charmian's mother, Amy—or at least of the semi-fictional mother that Clift was to depict in her unfinished autobiographical novel, *The End of the Morning*.

Veshti has her origin in T'se Ch'i's shy and beautiful eldest daughter, but in her elusiveness and her dreaming she reflects a side of Clift herself; the exuberant and sexually attractive Bitola reflects a different alter ego of the novelist.

As for Salom, the softness that marks him off from the other men was a quality of Charmian's brother Barré, whom she described as a 'peculiarly gentle boy' who 'was at his happiest and most relaxed with animals and smaller children'. His story, however, reflects themes in the lives of both his creators.

Although Charmian Clift and George Johnston came from very different family backgrounds, both felt themselves to be outsiders. Both had left their homes and familiar surroundings. And both, like Salom at the beginning of the novel, had very recently suffered rejection; had, indeed, virtually been drummed out of town.

While Salom's experience of alienation and exile was quite close to the bone, we can also see George Johnston and Charmian Clift leaving Melbourne and heading off to an

unknown future in the setting-out of Salom and Veshti. And in the Tulku's last words we can read a kind of defiant battle cry of the novelists: although they had been kicked out of their brilliant careers, and though the world had disapproved of their grand passion, 'they were the *undefeated!*'

This belief in their own power to succeed seemed justified when the novel won the *Sydney Morning Herald* competition.

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Finally, a note on the political context of *High Valley* —

Written in 1947, three years before the annexation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China and over a decade before the Dalai Lama would go into exile, *High Valley* cannot be read in the light of historical hindsight. If subsequent events, let alone what is known as the 'Serfdom in Tibet Controversy', make the book's politics seem naïve, it needs to be remembered that, at the time it was written, Mao was still engaged in the civil war and Australia was allied with the Kuomintang puppet regime.

Beneath the fairy tale romance, beneath the rip-roaring action, *High Valley* is a plea for toleration written by a man who had walked in the ruins of Hiroshima. *Journey Through Tomorrow* begins with the assertion that Asia 'is the continent of tomorrow' but it ends in a shabby mission garden where suddenly one day all the plants had wilted and died, and the birds had lain dead on the ground. An old missionary tells the dazed war correspondent. 'It will depend, now, upon people.'

George Johnston had a profound pessimism about what people would do with their 'tomorrow', but as a writer he saw it as his role to try to increase their knowledge and understanding. While Salom's moral development is dependent on his learning to respect the beliefs that he personally cannot endorse, the crucial lesson of *High Valley* is given by the Tulku, who indicts the West for being contemptuous of things it doesn't understand. Seventy

years on, it is message that begs repeating.

Nadia Wheatley, 2021