

Introduction by Martin Johnston

My mother, the writer Charmian Clift, died well over a decade ago. For most writers with only a couple of novels – by no means bestsellers – a couple of travel books, and miscellaneous essays to their credit, that would have been that. And yet it hasn't been. I couldn't begin to count the number of people who've asked me, ever since my mother's death, when they could expect a re-issue of one or all of the books, so I can hardly be alone in welcoming this one.

Charmian Clift thought herself primarily a novelist. But I doubt that she'd be unduly distressed at being remembered, as she undoubtedly is, far more for her non-fiction: the subtly, romantically, acerbically beautiful books about Greece, *Mermaid Singing* and *Peel Me a Lotus*, and in particular her essays. The essay was a form as new to her, when she undertook to produce one weekly for the *Sydney Morning Herald's* Women's Page in the mid sixties, as it was at least the level she immediately achieved – to the Australian newspaper reading public. Indeed, it was a form that had never been particularly cultivated here, except perhaps by Walter Murdoch.

As it turned out, it suited her particular combination of gifts uniquely well. She had a mind – I make no qualitative comparisons – not unlike Montaigne's. She was ready to look at everything and listen to anyone (indeed, she couldn't help doing either) and also to listen to herself. She had a vast range of what used to be called 'curious learning', especially of the sort she most loved: that of Shakespeare, Donne, Burton, Aubrey, Browne and Sterne. She wrote an English that in its love of the long, complicated yet ringing sentence went straight back to those favourite antecedents; brought a new kind of literacy to the Australian press; and, if it occasionally 'went over the top' did so in the manner of Hokusai's *Wave*, with strength and grace.

She loved people, sometimes hated them: no fault, I reckon; at least, no Laodicean shilly-shallying. She replied to a massive mail bag (not all fan mail) despite a huge and increasing workload; she never missed a deadline. Her faults, I think, in writing as in person, were those of generosity: she was never mean with her time, her empathy, or her subordinate clauses. And she never once let her own principles down, in any of these respects.

As recent years' efforts in the field of essays demonstrate, any owl can be learned as least at night, and any pin-head can sparkle. All too demonstrably, Charmian Clift founded no school. Too bad: but at least it's good to have this selection of her own essays again, to show – no, she'd think that too strong – to suggest how it might be done. We need another of her.