

Martin Johnston: Man of two nations

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Martin Clift Johnston had just turned seven in December 1954 when he arrived with his parents and younger sister on the remote Dodecanese island of Kalymnos.

Although born in Sydney, Martin had spent the last four years in London, and had almost no memory of Australia. Within a very short time, Greece became in many ways his homeland, and Greek became literally the language of his dreams.

At first, however, the seven-year-old pined for peanut butter and was confused by the Kalymnian boys, with their shaven heads and lack of commercially-produced playthings. Enrolled in the local primary school, Martin rapidly learned the language, gave away his collection of toy soldiers, and joined the gang of kids playing and swimming around the port-town of Pothia. As quickly, and as significantly, he exchanged Robin Hood and the Arthurian Knights for the *klephts* and War of Independence freedom fighters who would be his heroes for the rest of his life. At the end-of-school-year Speech Day in 1955, Martin — wearing a red *evzone* cap on his own shaven skull — proudly ‘brandished a wooden sword and declaimed in perfect Greek on the joys of being a guerrilla fighter in the mountains’ (his mother, Charmian Clift, recorded in her memoir *Mermaid Singing*).

After the family relocated to the island of Hydra, Martin attended the local primary and later secondary school, where he learned Ancient Greek and *Katharevousa* as well as the *Dimotiki* he fluently spoke, read and wrote. His extensive reading in Greek ran the gamut from Homer to anonymous folk ballads (which he was already translating into English), and from the poetry of the Nobel-prize-winners

Ritsos and Seferis to the popular journalism of the sports newspapers, where he followed the fortunes of his team, Olympiakos.

After the family's return to Australia in late 1964, Martin did his final year of schooling at North Sydney Boys' High, where Lex Marinos remembers him as being 'the first Anglo of my own age to make me feel good about being Greek'.

Even in his newfound Australian life, Martin's connection with Greece was undiminished. Like his mother and sister, he was active in the campaign against the Junta which in April 1967 illegally seized control of the government of Greece. A friend recalls that at a large pro-Democracy rally held in Sydney on the first anniversary of the coup 'an audible ripple of disapproval spread through the congregation' when 'Martin strode up to the podium, a slender vision in flared jeans and collarless muslin, hair flowing to his shoulders'.

The vibe was palpable. These proud democrats were there for a solemn cause, not to countenance a young hippie, who wasn't even Greek, reading poetry. But Martin, cocooned within his muse, simply commenced to read, in the eloquent Greek which had become his adoptive mother tongue. It took perhaps two stanzas for the hall to fall absolutely silent. By the time Martin was through, the conversion was complete.

Already by this time Martin Johnston was establishing himself as one of the finest Australian poets of his generation; in tandem with his own award-winning poems, he continued to translate the Greek authors he loved. His second book, *Ithaka: Modern Greek Poetry in Translation* (1973) is a work of English-language poetry in its own right.

Martin refused to travel to Greece while the Colonels were in power, but after the regime was overthrown, he and I spent the next three years there. Avoiding Hydra and the expat colony, we lived in the Peloponnese and northern Crete, where Martin's

parea comprised old men with whom he discussed history, politics and football, and his daily routine included eight hours of writing. As Martin would say in a 1980 interview for the National Library, ‘After a long hiatus, in which I hadn’t written all that much poetry, suddenly things seemed to be going right again. It was going back to Greece that did it.’ The work from that period can be found in *Beautiful Objects, Selected Poems of Martin Johnston* (Ligature, 2020).

Soon after his return to Australia in 1978, Martin joined the Subtitling Unit at the fledgling Special Broadcasting Service, where remained for the next decade. He is remembered for the unstinting support he gave his colleagues as well as for the brilliance of the work he did as both a Greek-language subtitler and an English-language subeditor.

At the time of his death in 1990, Martin Johnston was still working on his translations of anonymous Greek ballads. One of his favourite heroes that feature in this folk tradition was *Dhiyenis*, whose name he translated as ‘Man of two nations’. That was Martin himself: not so much a philhellene as a truly Greek-Australian, or an Australian-born Greek.

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