

A Portrait of the Artist as an Adolescent

- *Through his Mother's Eyes*

When Martin Johnston was 16-years-old he returned to Australia with his family and settled in Sydney. A few months later he turned 17, just as his essayist mother Charmian Clift began a weekly column for the Sydney Morning Herald. By the time of her death in July 1969 she had published around 230 essays. Martin was now 21 and on the brink of becoming Sydney's leading poet. The previous five years must have been quite the formative period for the young artist, as they are for most adolescents. What was Martin like in those years, what was his world?

In the Meredith trilogy, Martin's novelist father George Johnston based the character of Julian Meredith on son Martin. Of the three novels, George wrote the last two around the same period as Charmian's essays, thus giving glimpses into the person of Martin during these same five years. The caveat being that these glimpses are indirect and carry an unknown degree of literary licence.

This leaves Charmian's essays as the key source of insights to Martin the adolescent from an external perspective. In the main they are oblique asides, but asides that directly reference her eldest son, things that he says and does and the friends he keeps. All coloured by a mother's loving eye for her first-born. Beyond these references, her complete body of essays captures the socio-political climate of the household from which Martin will soon emerge, to enter the ranks of Sydney's greatest poets.

I have assembled all direct references to Martin from the complete set of Charmian's essay anthologies (four)¹. The most salient are listed here in chronological order, along with the essay title, date of publication and anthology title (acronymised). Some also appear in Nadia Wheatley's publication of selected essays.²

Finally, it is a pleasant coincidence that Martin and I had in common a passion for the works of James Joyce. Hence my nod to the emerging artist in the title for this compilation, an indulgence I could not resist.

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¹ Titles: *Images in Aspic* (1965), *The World of Charmian Clift* (1970), *Trouble in Lotus Land* (1990), *Being Alone with Oneself* (1991)

² Title: *Sneaky Little Revolutions* (2022)

On the occasion of Martin's seventeenth birthday party, his mother reflects on he and his friends in light of the looming military lottery that was conscription, which the Menzies government had introduced for 20-year-old males only a matter of days before this party:

They swarmed - gaggles of dewy girls hopefully beruffled like Tom Jones wenches, alarmingly elegant young men with stylish bangs and winkle-picker shoes who had all, apparently, been melted and poured into their pants before setting out. However, contrary to what the newspapers had led me to expect, they all had manners ranging from good to impeccable, really preferred soft drinks to hard, and were uninhibitedly young, and joyful rather than blasé or just rowdy in their singing and dancing. No couples, packs, or mixed teams disappeared at any stage into the bushland that surrounds our house, and there were no gate-crashers.

Far from being decadent, I found them rather poignant, particularly the young men - most of them in their senior school year or first year at university and tentatively positioned on the launching pad for the big take-off into adulthood.

Because this was a birthday and these were young men, one thought inevitably of the coming lotteries and wondered which of them - any of them? all of them? - in two years' time or three or one would receive among the cards and gifts and congratulations and sentimental commerce appropriate to the day that other official acknowledgement of manhood that will demand two years out of their lives.

They themselves were discussing the subject with a fairly good attempt at cynicism, but none of them really seemed to believe in it as a probability, at least not as a personal probability. It was, after all, years away and ten to one against. Still, there was a certain uneasiness, and one or two of them were almost sheepish, as potential victims of an unseemly practical joke.

Their elders, however, some of whom were hiding out with us in a relatively soundproof room, were vocal about reactions that ranged from bafflement to outrage.

(Essay "On lucky dips" unpublished, Nov 1964, TLL, SLR)

On household tensions with her adolescent children over the new sixties music, heightened by the arrival in Sydney of an English rock band:

"But, Mum... you said... you promised...Mum, it's the ROLLING STONES!" and the eldest draws himself up from first stomp position to a dignified six foot two, brushes fashionably shaggy bangs from myopic eyes, and murmurs with cutting coolness, "In any case we have our allowances.. ." And the house is rocking again with the Mersey Beat.. .

"If music be the food of love, play on..." my husband mumbles, with, I think, commendable restraint.

I remind him that Orpheus, another popular vocalist, was eventually torn to bits by his female fans. Perhaps history will repeat itself?

He shudders and reminds me that the severed head of Orpheus floated across the sea from Thrace all the way to Lesbos, STILL SINGING.

(Essay "Yeah yeah yeah we have no bananas" pub. 28/1/65, IIA)

On teenagers of the 1960s:

*I know that teen-agers are absolute conformists. I've watched my own two and their friends at it. At week-ends and holidays, free of the school uniforms they hate, they all rush voluntarily into uniform. In fact there is a curiously hermaphroditic quality to the jeans-and-skivvy tossing-hair uniform, as if it isn't enough to be an obvious boy teen-ager or girl teen-ager. Real security seems to lie in being absolutely **anonymously** teen-ager.*

She goes on to comment:

These children are living through a social and sexual revolution, which is difficult enough, but just to complicate it further they are being forced to live it on-stage, with every spot in the house trained on them and the audience reaction one long groan of disapproval.

And finishes the essay with this:

The future is theirs, not ours. And who is so pessimistic as to believe they will inevitably make a greater mess of it than we did?

(Essay "On teenagers" pub. 4/2/1965, IIA)

On Martin and friends leaving school:

These days after school hours our house is often invaded by a group of very large and rather formidably intellectual young men, classmates and comrades of our eldest son, who have found this place to be a convenient centre for activities that range from the launching of a satirical newspaper to the recording on tape of their own renditions of folk songs...

*I need to remind myself fairly constantly that these alarmingly erudite young creatures are probably quite normally slothful, smutty-minded, sloppy-thinking, and plagued by all the muddle of doubts and uncertainties appropriate to their years and the state of the society into which they are so fearfully soon to be plummeted, sink or swim. The plummeting, of course, being dependent on whether they get through *The Leaving*, which is beginning to loom large and close and intimidating.*

*[as a parent]... one finds oneself increasingly out of patience with guitar-strumming , clever parodies, folk philosophies, witty editorial conferences, chess problems, debating tactics, scintillating skits for the Mavis Bramston Show, tape recording sessions, and all the other absorbing activities into which they pour such quantities of enthusiasm. Damn it, don't they realise *The Leaving* is only a few months away? Why aren't they **swotting**?*

... it is right and healthy that these young reject out of hand the old values and the old myths that used to serve us as rough spiritual direction posts. Naturally enough, as staunch iconoclasts, they want to create their own. One can only hope, that before their turn comes to be regarded as quaint and old-fashioned, they will have a chance to be audacious, to fight for their own causes, to use all their excessive talents to some end in which they believe.

(Essay "Leaving for what" pub. 8/7/1965, IIA)

On his mother's dilemma with the local trend to obsessive household cleanliness:

As for cobwebs..... both my husband and my elder son have an irrational fondness for spiders, and can spend hours in rapt contemplation of these creatures' playful habits. There have been occasions when I have felt that the Addams Family would find our domestic atmosphere relaxing and familiar.

(Essay "Keeping it clean" pub. 5/8/1965, IAA)

Wondering what topic to write about:

I asked my son, who often helps me out in these recurring crises, what I should write about, and he looked up vaguely from a Ruy Lopez (Steinitz Defence Deferred) involvement which was engaging his attention and said, briefly: 'Chess.' I thought about this for a while, and indeed some fairly wild ideas began to beat about in my brain, echoes of the sort of delirious and dizzy conversations that are tossed about among the young men who gather around that old chess board. 'How the Bishop was Rooked.' 'The Blackest Knight in the Castle.' 'How to Identify Losing Gambits, by Napoleon, Hitler, and Barry GoldH2O.' But I think it is their subject, rather than mine, and I shall leave them to write their chess articles themselves.

(Essay "On being unable to write an article" pub. 2/12/1965, TLL, SLR)

Bemoaning the local garbage strike in Mosman:

But my elder son, who is reading philosophy, attempted to console me by reminding me that at least we did not-like other unfortunates in other suburbs-have seeping sullage to contend with, and by the way he hissed the sibilants I suspected that he quite liked the alliteration and would probably use 'seeping sullage' in a poem sometime. Satirically, of course.

(Essay "O brave new world" pub. 29/6/1967, TLL)

When Martin was 20 his mother wrote an essay on young people's parties. She comments at length on one particular party held at her place. The party is almost certainly one of Martin's.

They began to arrive in twos and fours, some I knew and some I didn't, and they all seemed very pleased to see the food and the flagon emptied in no time at all. Introductions were quite conventional for an hour or so, but after that it was apparent that there was a kitchen group and a living-room group who didn't seem to know each other at all and didn't want to, but before I could do anything about it another lot arrived and they had various bottles which they seemed intent on secreting in unlikely places, behind things and under things and even in my study, where I had been doing a bit of secreting myself of various little odds and ends I wanted preserved, like a couple of decanters and a carton of cigarettes. Soon there were fifty or so of beards and dundrearies (which seem to be terribly in) and long-haired girls and short-haired girls wearing very with-it clothes, like striped shimmies with hanging knickers to match, and the record-player was going full blast, although nobody was doing anything excessive or interesting yet-perhaps because they were too busy eating the food and emptying the flagons. By eleven o'clock there were more than a hundred, including a group of flower people in beads and bells and a girl who went upstairs to change into purple drapes and

put a hydrangea in her navel. The flower people seemed to be extras with transcendental instructions to keep in perpetual motion, in one door and out the other, which was pretty difficult since everybody was playing Sardines willy-nilly by this time in every room of the house, and there were more arrivals heaving and shoving through the front door and looking so like the people who were heaving and shoving in the kitchen that maybe they were extras too. A young soldier who had been telling me how he was going to make a fortune in Vietnam selling emu feathers to the Americans said he thought all university students were stuck-up slobs. I think he was morose at having his beer pinched. Nobody knew anybody any more, although somebody was kind enough to say that he thought my husband, hung about with the prettiest girls and being waited on hand and foot, looked quite like the writer George Johnston. I said I thought so too. I retired, defeated, at half-past two. There was a little light lute music on the deck, the kitchen rocked with inventive and frighteningly energetic dance, folk-singing was whining and wheedling in the living-room, and Zorba's dance proceeded awkwardly in the hall. Nobody was smoking pot, or doing anything excessively anti-social, and there was no sign of meditation, except perhaps in the glazed eyes of the young man who had kept his whisky flasks strictly to himself. They all seemed to be having a wonderful time.

(Essay "The party" pub. 14/12/1967, WCC)

After the launch of a new book of poetry titled *Verse by Young Australians* (in which Martin does not appear), she may well have had her son in mind with this reflection:

How good it is that kids write poetry. And how right it is that they should be encouraged to do so. And to read poetry. And to say poetry. [My friend] said: 'Poets are the only people that the young can believe in any more. They are the only people left with souls.'

I don't suppose for a moment that all the young Australians represented in this anthology will become full-time practising poets. I don't think it matters. Perhaps one or two of them will travel that lonely stony heartbreaking high road. But all of them, I believe will understand something of that road even though they have not the equipment, finally, nor the courage, to take it.

(Essay "On plugging poetry" pub. 18/4/1968, BAWO)

On bemoaning the national trait of a lack of honesty and plain speaking in public and timidity when expressing an opinion in public.

By expressing, publicly, a belief or a conviction or an idea that is original one might find oneself in the unhappy position of being expected to lead rather than follow, and wouldn't that upset the even tenor of the great way of life and really muck up the weekends. My elder son was in the habit of approaching me each morning with an imaginary microphone and mordantly saying: 'Please make an opinion, Miss Clift,' and by golly I did, out of devilment and to keep in practice. But I shan't any more. I'm practising saying nothing now.

(Essay "The voice of the people" pub. 2/5/68, BAWO)

Her last insightful reference to Martin is found soon after, in the essay “The habitual way” dated 27/6/1968, where we first learn he has left home, at the age of 20.

...my eldest child has left home to pig it alone (I must add quickly with my cheers and blessings)..

(BAWO, SLR)