

## A Portrait of the Artist as an Adolescent

### - *Through his Father's Eyes*

In 1964 Martin Johnston returned to Australia from Greece with his family and settled on Sydney's north shore. A few months later he turned 17. By then his essayist mother Charmian Clift had begun a weekly newspaper column. His writer father George Johnston, though suffering from tuberculosis, was working on *Clean Straw for Nothing*, the second in a trilogy of novels, building on his Miles Franklin success with the first, *My Brother Jack*.

In the Meredith trilogy, Martin's father based the character of Julian Meredith on his son Martin. The trilogy traverses the life of Julian's father David, from his earliest memories growing up in Melbourne, to his imminent death in Sydney. It is semi-autobiographical, with most members of Martin's family appearing as thinly disguised members of Julian's family. Martin's mother Charmian appears as Cressida Meredith. Of the three novels, George drafted the last, *A Cartload of Clay*, in the twelve months before his death in 1970. It is the only one of the trilogy to be based entirely in Sydney. Martin was in his early twenties then, and on the brink of becoming one of Sydney's leading poets. What was he like then, what was his world?

The character of Julian Meredith tells us something of this, the caveat being that these glimpses carry an unknown degree of his father's literary licence. Or do they? Given the closely autobiographical nature of *Cartload*, George's biographer (Garry Kinnane) observes that 'as David Meredith and George Johnston grow closer together in *A Cartload of Clay*, their identities become indistinguishable'. So may the identities of Julian and Martin.

In my counterpart piece to this essay, *A Portrait of the Artist as an Adolescent: Through his Mother's Eyes*, I have outlined how Martin's mother Charmian Clift has similarly left us a rich source of insights to Martin the adolescent, through her published essays from 1964 to 1969. All coloured by a mother's loving eye for her first-born son of course, as are his father's descriptions a coloured version of Martin through Julian Meredith. Beyond these direct references to their son, we also have Charmian's complete body of essays to thank for capturing the socio-political climate of the household from which Martin would soon emerge, to enter the ranks of Sydney's poetry community.

I have assembled direct references to Martin-through-Julian from his father's *A Cartload of Clay*. I have also included several pertinent excerpts from the previous novel in the trilogy, *Clean Straw for Nothing*.

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.

Julian Neylan  
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Note: All but one of the following quotations are sourced from Martin's father's novels *Clean Straw for Nothing* or *A Cartload of Clay*<sup>1</sup>.

We begin with a small but important quote from *Clean Straw for Nothing* (p79) which strikes me as a scene-setter for Martin's later entry into Sydney's poetry community. His alter ego Julian Meredith is only two years old when father David Meredith, working in Sydney in 1949, makes this comment on how Australians at large regard poetry. He is reflecting on the plight of his journalistic colleague, Jefferson:

His writing was good enough to excite envy, and he also wrote poetry, which in itself was, in Australia, a pretty dubious activity unless the poetry was balladic, chauvinistic or sentimental, and Jefferson's troubled verse certainly fitted into none of these categories.

*Clean Straw for Nothing*, p128, Greece 1961 (Martin (Julian) is 14)

David and Cressida are in conversation with friend Miriam, with David narrating. Miriam begins:

'But what of their future, my dears? Julian is a brilliant boy, a very brilliant boy. This I am the first to admit, but what about his education? Is it to be nothing beyond a primitive little Greek island school?'

'He probably gets a damned sight better old-fashioned classical education here than he'd get most other places,' I said. 'He learns the three Rs the hard way. And he keeps up his English. We get the books sent out. He's doing all right, you know. After all, he's only fifteen.'

'Precisely. You know perfectly well what Sir Terence thinks about him, about his going on to Oxford. The child should be given his chance, and —'

'Oh, for Christ's sake, Miriam, let's be practical!' I cut in irritably. 'What bloody chance have I got of sending him to Oxford? The only spare cash we've got —*when* we've got any spare cash - goes on - getting a few books out for him from Foyle's. If he really *wants* to go to Oxford, and he's good enough, he'll do it in his own time and on his own terms. In any case, that's all years ahead.'

*Clean Straw for Nothing*, p293, Sydney 1968 (Martin is 21)

Cressida is visiting David in hospital, with both in the third person:

Before she left she said, 'What I'm most thrilled about, though, apart from your coming home, is Julian,' and he smiled at her, sharing her delight, although after she had gone he found himself wondering what he really thought about Julian winning the poetry prize at the university and deciding he wanted to be a writer.

It would be quite different for him, of course; he didn't quite know in what way it would be different although he saw that everything was different for Julian's generation, even though he couldn't really understand them. He didn't at all subscribe to the common belief that they had it

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<sup>1</sup> The page numbers are from the 2013 edition published by Harper Collins Publishers Australia Pty Ltd titled *Clean Straw for Nothing & A Cartload of Clay*.

easier, but he did have the feeling that they probably had a better chance of not ending up the way he had, neither demonstrably a failure nor demonstrably a success, a kind of in-between man. Surely the obvious thing, anyway, was to go for the safe way and chase security? It was odd that this was the one question he was never able to answer.

*A Cartload of Clay*, pp311-14 (Martin is 23)

Though Charmian died in 1969 George has kept Cressida alive while he commenced drafting this unfinished novel in 1970. That was the final year of David Meredith's life, as it was for George. He has fashioned a Meredith household for the novel that comprises parents Cressida and David and their two children, with Julian at university but living with his parents and sister. This excerpt and those that follow are from David's perspective:

There was a mess in the kitchen when he went out to make coffee, unwashed glasses and cups and the remains of pies and hamburgers on greasy plates and an emptied wine flagon. Julian must have come in late with some of his student friends. In the living-room the floor was scattered with records, most of them out of their sleeves, and a ruby beam like the wink of light reflected in a glass of burgundy told him that the record-player had been left switched on. There were books thrown around everywhere.

When he had made his coffee he took it into the living-room and switched off the record-player, feeling its wasteful warmth beneath his fingers, and began to pick up the strewn books, but one of them commanded his attention because it was an anthology of oriental poetry, which somebody, Julian probably, had left open at the section concerned with the works of Wen Yi-tuo. Julian was writing some pretty good poetry himself and was going through a phase of being much under the influence of Eastern verse and Ravi Shankar's sitar music, although not sufficiently so, Meredith observed, to do him the courtesy of putting his records back in their sleeves. He wondered what Julian might think - would it for instance establish a kind of connection? - if he learned that his father once, long ago in China, had known Wen Yi-tuo.

He was still absorbed in the book when he heard Cressida get up and go into the kitchen. He went out to her, carefully carrying his cup, the coffee cold and untasted.

'Julian must have brought his mob back,' he said. 'I didn't hear them, did you?'

'Oh, vaguely,' Cressida nodded. 'I was conscious of someone being here. Playing records.'

'They drank up all the grog.'

'And left the usual shambles in there.' She had looked into the living-room.

'Ah well, they're young,' he said, feeling tolerant because of the anthology of poems. He thought it best to say nothing about the mess he had cleaned up in the kitchen. 'They were probably having a wallow in their music and shouting poetry at each other and ramming down their opinions and griping about the bloody mess we've made of the world. After all, they only muck up a kitchen and the living-room.' He was still held in his mood of reminiscence and said, 'Julian's got hold of a book of Chinese poetry. They were reading some stuff by a poet I knew in Kunming years and years ago.'

*A Cartload of Clay*, pp349-51 (Martin is 23)

David is waiting for the bus with a stranger, the 'Ocker', who starts up a conversation:

'Yeah, and the boy?' the man asked suspiciously.

'Oh, you wouldn't go for him. He's a student at the uni. He's got long hair. He's in all the protest demos. He writes poetry. Quite good poetry, I think.'

'Poetry!' The word came to his lips, contemptuous, and rested there like a stone, in the curled sling of his mouth.

'No law against that either, is there?' Meredith was suddenly reminded of his discovery, when they had moved into the house, of the pile of unread books stuffed into the old cabin trunk ... and coming across the old worn volume of Australian bush ballads that had been Julian's treasure when he was a child in Greece. ... Young Julian had been enthralled by it, loving the simplicity of the drama, the long slow hoofbeat rhythm of the verse; quite probably the book had stirred some secret atavistic longing in the child because it had started him off writing his own poetry. Leafing through the battered old volume, Meredith had been halted by the boy's marking of the pages listing the contents; in each section he had numbered his favourite ballads 1 to 7 ... and against Adam Lindsay Gordon's 'The Sick Stockrider' he had carefully printed the words in Greek and English, *Kallitero ap' ola. Best of them all.* ...it was ... bizarre to think of young Julian coming back to his unremembered Australia and seeking to find substance and reality in the half-recollected, half-vanished stuff of memory, a child's memory and a race memory mingled as vapour and water are mingled into the tenuous dissipating drifts of mist...

'Listen, I'll give you the drum,' the big man was saying. 'He gits in with that student mob, that boy of yours, he'll be on the fuckin' drugs, you don't look out. Far as these young 'uns are concerned you take my tip, mate. You watch 'em.'

'Why should we? We don't have time anyway. I mean, we've got our work cut out to watch ourselves, don't we?' Odd to think that the big man would probably like 'The Sick Stockrider'.

... Yet this coarse, middle-aged man with his jug-handle ears and his red vulture-naked neck would see Julian as a lout simply because of the length his hair was worn, or because he carried a placard in an anti-war demonstration or wore Hippy badges - Julian with his shyness and sensitivity, his bewildered gropings for a place in a society concerned with things and not with ideas, his trance-like absorption in his music and poetry, his endless intellectual searchings, his gentleness. No place for Julian, though, on the solid four-square platform of the Ocker's moral certainties. What was alarming, really, was what happened to people for the burly oaf had once been young, a youth like Julian ... Long ago a poem must have sung in his heart too.

*A Cartload of Clay*, pp382-3 (Martin is 23)

As he crouched on the edge of the divan, recovering his breath he heard Julian come into the living room and he called out, 'Can you give me a hand in here a moment?'

The boy appeared at the doorway, tall and thin, stooped over as if afraid of bumping his head against the lintel, his eyes blinking behind his spectacles. He wore the sort of glasses that were now very much 'in' but which were of an old-fashioned style, with thin gold rims, the kind of specs which when Meredith was a boy would always provoke jeering taunts of 'Four-eyes!'

Julian looked ill-at-ease, but this was the impression he generally gave when he came into a room, partly a natural shyness, partly a wariness of what might be in store for him: in this case his father's 'Can you give me a hand?' indicated that something practical would be expected of him and he was well aware that practicality was not his strong point. Nonetheless, if there was misgiving in his expression there was also a willingness, almost an eagerness, to be of help, a desperate flicker of hope that this time, just this once, some mantle of efficiency would magically fall upon him and he would take command and fix whatever had to be fixed with skill and dexterity and in, as Miss Aubrey would say, a 'trice'. There was no real likelihood of this happening. Julian tripped, spilled things, burnt the bottoms out of saucepans, broke the handles off cups, left lights on, knocked things over, scratched even his own most treasured LPs, connected the wrong leads and blew fuses.

Meredith, although sometimes irritated by his son's almost pathological clumsiness, was sympathetic to the boy, suspecting that most of the reason for his maladroitness went back to Greece, to the years when he was groping about half-blind, never saying anything to Cressida or him about it, so that it was years before they had been even aware of the severity of his myopia and had taken him tardily to Athens to see if an oculist could do something about it. Cressida had never been able to forgive herself for that; her son's short-sightedness she saw as her fault; she and David had been far too engrossed in their own social and economic and emotional problems on the island, with a consequent neglect of the children's well-being.

*A Cartload of Clay*, pp384 (Martin is 23)

Julian is helping his father open a window in the house:

Together they pushed and shook the refractory window but it remained stubbornly immovable.

'Try a bit of a karate chop, eh?' said Julian encouragingly. He began to strike at the upper edge of the window-frame with the heel of his hand, sharp thudding blows that hurt his flesh. A large crack appeared as if by an act of illusion diagonally across the pane of glass.

'Shit!' said Meredith.

'Oh dear!' Julian murmured.

'Well, that solves our problem, doesn't it? That decides it for us!'

'We have to ring for the handyman bloke now, and he can fix the whole bloody lot!' He might have known. The boy really was the kiss of death! Him and his bloody karate chop! (For months and months Julian had subscribed to a magazine called *Black Belt*, on the theory that the art of unarmed self-defence would help him with his short sight and long hair and physical shortcomings and the unpopularity in some quarters of his political views and student attitudes, but he had never been able to master the simplest grip or hold, and in his practices was always getting thrown about and often quite badly hurt by his opponents.) Julian, flushed with embarrassment, turned his head away, and Meredith put a gentle hand on his shoulder and grinned and said, 'It doesn't matter. What's a pane of glass, for Christ's sake?'

Finally, the biographer of Martin's father, Garry Kinnane, provides this comment on the father-son relationship during the final year of George's life<sup>2</sup>:

Johnston saw more of Martin from this time on, too. They talked more as friends now than as father and son, with a common interest in literature. He was no doubt pleased to see Martin following a path similar to his own, and with promise: Martin was reviewing for the *Bulletin* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, and had started a poetry press at Sydney University, where he was again, studying part-time. In fact, Martin's prodigious reading enabled him to pass on several authors of interest to his father: not only Borges and Ionesco (whom Johnston had referred to in his 'Aspects of the Novel' lecture), but also Seferis, Camus and Nabokov were among those who were to prove of use in his current writing.

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<sup>2</sup> *George Johnston: A Biography*, G. Kinnane, p285 (hardcover)