

In a strange way, Martin Johnston was a profound influence on my girlhood aspiration to become a trapeze artist. I first encountered him in the Metropole (or ‘Madhouse’) movie theatre in Broken Hill, the mining town in the far west of New South Wales where I was born and grew up. He was on the large silvery screen, a nimble sprite dashing about on seaside rocks, declaiming Greek poetry. This was in a newsreel story filmed on an island in Greece where the Australian writers, George Johnston and Charmian Clift, and their children were living what seemed to me to be utterly glamorous and desirable lives, revolving around writing, swimming, and convivial get togethers. After this dramatic *coup d’oeil*, I changed my mind about the allure of the trapeze, thinking instead of becoming a writer.

I recalled these first glimpses of Martin Johnston and his family more fully in my memoir, *Skywriting: making radio waves*. This extended excerpt tells of their enduring resonance as the images took hold of my imagination, coalescing in a radio feature for ABC Radio National, *Persona: the parallel lives of Charmian Clift*:

Before the main film, there was an opening news magazine. One story made a vivid impact on me, more so than anything that followed. It was about the writer, George Johnston, his wife, Charmian Clift, and their children Martin, Shane, and Jason, as they went about their carefree existence on the Greek island of Hydra. This was the idyllic family life I wanted; so relaxed, following the pleasures of whim and weather, unburdened by petty timetables and routine jobs. As writers, the parents spent the morning tapping creative thoughts at their typewriters, in their whitewashed house, before repairing to a taverna-like shop near the port to join friends in conversation, enlivened by beakers of wine, and platters of scrumptious looking food. Coiffed, circumspect local women in widow’s black seemed to take care of cooking at home, shopping in the market, and keeping an attentive eye on the younger children. Martin was the oldest, closest in age to me.

What impressed me greatly was Martin’s liberty to run barefoot around the island, as he declaimed poetry. In Greek! He was gawky, awkward, skinny, like a newly hatched chicken. But he flew on wings of imagination. I wanted to be like Martin Johnston. And I wanted to grow up to be like his mother — glamorous, clever, confident, looking like a Hollywood beauty, and speaking with the classy tones of Vivien Leigh, but with a voice dripping in honey from Greek bees, drunk on nectar from wild lavender, oregano, and thyme. She swam like Esther Williams, and wore simple, striking clothes, with consummate flair, and ease. Somewhere in the film,

George and Charmian displayed a beautiful Greek vase, with ancient figures telling a mythic tale. I was utterly enchanted.

Towards the end of my first year at Sydney University, I moved out of the accommodation my mother had arranged for me with a family in Annandale, into a share flat in Forest Lodge, directly opposite the Union theatre. Soon after, I attended a party in nearby Glebe, a jolly gathering squashed into a flat in one of the old houses on Wigram Road. It was Martin Johnston's housewarming. He was now fully grown, thin, tall, bespectacled, with long wispy hair, and a scholar's pale, freckled complexion. His long, tapered fingers held a pungent cigarette, and a glass of golden retsina. I'd met Martin in the offices of *Honi Soit*, the university newspaper whose literary pages we contributed to, and at poetry events. Amongst the throng of students and assorted bohemian guests, I found a few familiar spirits. Retsina, with its powerful aroma of pine resin, and curious taste (unlike the nectar of the gods I'd imagined) went to my head, along with cigarette fumes, giving me an ugly headache, and I left before long, walking home, past the public school which my Pop had attended as a child, when he cheekily caught free rides on the trams that once commanded the centre of the road. 'If he could see me here now, and the changes in Glebe', I thought, 'He'd be surprised.'

Martin remained a sporadic friend in the poetry scene, centred on Balmain and Glebe. We read at the same events and were published in small poetry magazines. His erudition was astonishing, and his temperament, gentle and sweet. The family had returned from its Greek idyll to live in Australia in 1964, at the time of his father's great success with his *Miles Franklin* prize-winning novel, *My Brother Jack*. Martin's mother, Charmian Clift, became a celebrated columnist with the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*, writing often about her family, as issues affected them, including the impact of the Vietnam War. Less than a year after Martin's party, in 1969, Charmian ended her life, with an overdose of barbiturates, and George, ravaged by TB and bronchial pneumonia, died the following year.

When I went to work at the ABC in the mid-1970s, I learnt from Allan Ashbolt that he'd been close friends with both writers, in their circle of intimates, as well as all three being active members of the Australian Society of Authors. 'Charmian was by far the better writer', he said authoritatively, and admiringly, to a group of us over

lunch one day. I could see his point. George Johnston dashed off books in a racy, vernacular style, and was immensely popular, but Charmian wrote with a poetic style and grace, from exquisite miniature essays to travel memoirs, and novels. I learnt from Allan how to correctly pronounce her name, with a hard 'Ch'. He called her Charm. Both figures were much loved, but there's a real sense that in her lifetime Charmian did not see the full rewards, and literary recognition, her writing deserved. Or her full impact on new forms of writing for television, a medium she enthusiastically embraced, not having seen it at all through their Greek years when she regarded it as a likely monster.

Martin's girlfriend in the 1970s was Nadia Wheatley, and together they travelled overseas, living and writing in Greece for several years. Although no longer a couple, Nadia remained Martin's friend, and at his insistence they planned a collaborative writing project about both of his parents that never came to pass. She did write introductions to Charmian's novel, *Walk to the Paradise Gardens*, re-issued in 1989, and for her edited selection of Charmian's essays, published in 1990, to complement an earlier edition published following her death, selected by her husband, and illustrated imaginatively by Martin.

In 2002, Nadia published her considered, comprehensive literary biography, *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift*, also editing *The Selected Essays of Charmian Clift*, to bring a substantial amount of her original, sparkling writing to the attention of a new generation of readers. Having read Nadia's book, and revisited Charmian's work, I was drawn into an imaginative realm, and ready to make a program for *The Listening Room*. In a dramatic, petulant power play by senior managers inside the ABC, the internationally acclaimed, innovative show of 16 years standing was abruptly axed from Classic FM around this time. Fittingly, *Persona: the parallel lives of Charmian Clift*, aired several months later on Radio National in a Sunday evening feature slot that she might have inhabited as a radio writer, 50 years before.

There's more of Clift's story in my memoir, particularly about her own writing of radio features for the ABC and her attractive, sonorous voice. Her voice was beautifully cultivated, an actor's voice with carefully modulated tones and an understanding of how to project her persona through this instrument to great effect. As a long-time radio producer, I'm well acquainted with the human voice, when it's simply speaking words and when it's telling

truths. Thanks to oral histories and radio recordings, we have the means to listen long past the ephemeral moment – to hear public pronouncements and private uncertainties, as in Hazel de Berg’s precious oral history of Charmian Clift

Martin Johnston’s voice was also distinctive, possibly because of his formative years in England and Greece (exposed to native Greek speakers and expatriate literati) and, due to his early immersion in writing, he spoke with a poet’s cadences. In 2016, I was astonished to learn two things from Susan Johnston, author of *The Broken Book*, a novel loosely modelled on Charmian Clift: that my radio feature (accompanied by a screening of photographs) had been presented to a gathering at a conference on Clift and Johnston in the courtyard of the very house they lived in on Hydra; and that English author, Elizabeth Jane Howard, took ‘a poetry-spouting Martin-as-a-child’ and set him in her novel, *The Sea Change*. The boy poet spouted poetry, it seems, not only for the film cameras, but was observed and recorded in written form. Susan wrote, ‘She says she lifted him pretty much straight from life – almost a genius, gifted, incredibly knowledgeable, a total delight’.

I now know that Hazel de Berg recorded Martin Johnston’s oral history, but for the radio feature I made on Clift I greatly appreciated access to a revelatory recording made in 1986, in which Martin spoke to Nadia Wheatley, his dear friend and former girlfriend. It was extremely poignant to hear, as I wrote in *Skywriting*:

And there was another radio gem to complement the generous, insightful interview Nadia gave me, a conversation she had conducted with Martin about his parents’ lives, and work. Nadia had never met Martin’s parents; both were dead prior to their relationship, but she knew a lot about them and in her unedited interview with Martin, I could hear him open to her, in ways no other interrogator could have achieved. It was raw in emotion, delicate, loving, intimate, candid. Martin’s own early death, in 1990, aged 42, adds to the poignancy of this recording, with its insights into his life and nature, as well as illuminating those of his parents ...

He spoke explicitly of [Charmian’s] *persona*, the inextricable links between her public and private identities, and the way her weekly column was a ‘very artful, fictional literary construct.’ She herself wrote a column on this theme, expressing the belief that people have two lives: the one they’ve lived and a parallel life, as it were. With his own fine writer’s skill, Martin also revealed something of Charmian’s inner world, and her anxieties as she perceived her beauty fading in her 40s.

Someone once said to me that a radio program is like an iceberg, very little of it appears above the surface and so much beneath, unknown to the listener. In this case, there were discoveries I made in the ABC document archives that didn't find their way into my radio feature but revealed more about Martin, the precocious, wondrous wordsmith, and the encouragement he enjoyed from his writer parents. On their return to Sydney, they re-established connections with the ABC's Radio Drama and Features department and were formally commissioned in early 1965 to write a serial, on which Charmian was already at work and against which two fees of 50 pounds had already been advanced.

Two years later, George Johnston wrote to Ivan Smith, producer of the poetry feature program, *Quality Street*, enclosing 'a thing which my son Martin (Arts II at Sydney Uni.) has done with *Quality Street* in mind'. It was a detailed script for a radio feature, the cover page noting its name as *Songs of the Eagle* and the author as Martin Johnston, Hydra, Greece.

The songs, George Johnston observed, are 'a fabulously colourful and almost unknown (to English-speaking people) area of moving balladry.' Most impressively, he notes that Martin has done the translations and they are the first done in English; also, that he could perform the readings himself as 'he was educated in Greece and this in many ways is his first language'.

Martin wrote this remarkably mature work, as he says in the introduction, 'as a sixteen-year-old Australian schoolboy' whilst living on Hydra, having for some years made a study of Klepht lore and legend. The Klephts were very appealing to the romantic, imaginative and quite political youth: they were fierce and indomitable mountain people, derided as bandits (kleptomania and kleptocracy derive from their name) or revered as anti-Ottoman rebel insurgents, who recorded their brave deeds and hardships in stirring, poetic ballads. They were the kind of rugged heroes I can imagine Lord Byron, Patrick Leigh Fermor and Bruce Chatwin admiring.

Intriguingly, the cover note specifies that the script accompanies a tape recording – which I would so love to hear, if it still exists – listing the voices of Charmian Clift, Gordon Merrick and Martin Johnston. Merrick was an American expat writer, former actor and wartime spy, then living on Hydra.

The proposal was accepted but from what I can glean, most probably in a different form to the submitted tape and script, as following correspondence reveals changes were requested and made. Martin's script displays an accomplished command of his novel subject;

life and literature integrated in his selection of poetic ballads by Klepht mountain rebels, who would come to be revered as Hellenist heroes in helping vanquish the Turks. The producer assigned to liaise with Martin was legendary radio documentarian, John Thompson. *Songs of the Eagle* aired on the Second Network (later evolving into Radio National). It was later repeated, earning Martin an additional fee.

Having read the script, I know I would have welcomed it as a commission later for *The Listening Room*, thrilling to the possibilities of using the original tape recording with Martin, Charmian and Gordon Merrick, inter-weavings of Greek poetry and translation, evocative music and sounds. Strangely, three decades after Martin's Klepht poems, I found myself fashioning similar material for Poetica, on the same ABC national radio network, in a feature on then president of East Timor, Xanana Gusmão, based on poems he wrote in his mountain lair as guerrilla commander during the Indonesian occupation.

Emboldened by his success with *Songs of the Eagle*, Martin submitted another script to the Drama department in 1969, this time on Christopher Smart, only to be rebuffed as the subject had been comprehensively covered on a recent *Poet's Tongue*. The reader's report was positive, but he was advised to drop in for a talk about possible subjects of interest and to find out more about departmental requirements, which I think remained opaque to budding freelancers. Evidently, Martin contributed to *Books and Ideas*, another literary program housed in Allan Ashbolt's innovative department of Radio Special Projects where I started my ABC career. Genuine interest was shown in both areas about Martin's ability to review and write for radio, and probably a fondness on account of his parent's prior connections.

This was about the time I knew Martin in the poetry scene centred on Balmain and Glebe, and particularly at Sydney university where poetry workshops under the tutelage of Dr Jim Tulip and David Malouf inspired many younger writers. Fresh out of high school in Broken Hill and yearning to tread the literary path, once at university I had gravitated to the offices of the student newspaper, *Honi Soit*, submitting poems, soaking up atmosphere. Before long, although I'm not sure how, I briefly became literary editor, alternating this role with Martin, the boy poet I'd seen and admired on a newsreel some years before, who was now fully fledged. To move in the same circle seemed remarkable. The poets with whom we mingled in those heady times, publishing also in *New Poetry* and *Poetry Magazine*, included Robert Adamson, John Tranter, Richard Tipping, Kerry Levés, J.S. Harry, Franco Paisio, Nigel Roberts, Vicki Viidikas, Carl Harrison-Ford and Charles Buckmaster. Some of us, including Martin, performed at a particularly rowdy anti-Vietnam War reading at Sydney University

organised by Michael Wilding on behalf of the Draft Resisters' Union, captured in colourful detail in Frank Moorhouse's memoir, *Days of Wine and Rage*.

Preparing this contribution for this valuable commemorative website, I've dwelled on these early associations; my fond memories enhanced and revitalised by what can now be found in digital archives. In 2016, the University of Sydney made a substantial collection of *Honi Soit* and *Hermes* available online. Sifting through some old issues from 1968 and 1969, I've found poems by Martin and an erudite theatre review of Shaw's *Androceles and the Lion* that demonstrated how widely read he was and his exposure to theatre. In 1969, he participated in a forum on the Greek dictatorship, conducted by the Students Representative Council (the publisher of the student papers). He was described as a prominent *Honi Soit* staffer, who had lived in Greece for eleven years and who likened the political situation in Greece to theatre of the absurd. How very Martin to make this association, of which he must have despaired!

There are also some copies of the classier companion literary magazine, *Hermes*. The 1969 edition carries four impressive poems by Martin and one poem of mine I'd forgotten and was pleased to see.

This source of Martin's published poems and reviews is a useful addition to what else exists. John Tranter, a close friend and fellow poet, was exceptional in keeping the memory of Martin's work alive through arranging and shepherding to publication, *Martin Johnston – Selected Poems and Prose*; and in his trailblazing online magazine, *Jacket*, where his introductory literary-biographical essay to the book gives context to a rich and informed digital selection of Martin's poems and essays, along with photographs. Now, this commemorative website will gather further important reflections and tributes to one of Australia's finest writers of the wave that swept through the stuffy literary scene of the 1960s and 70s – the gentle, intellectual, dishevelled, bespectacled, long haired bohemian, recalled with the wine dark sea swirling in his glass and a cigarette in hand.

Robyn Ravlich

**Robyn Ravlich** is a writer and broadcaster who knew Martin Johnston during the 1960s and '70s. Her memoir/cultural history, *Skywriting: making radio waves* (Brandl & Schlesinger, 2019, and Kindle e-book), details the genesis of her radio feature, *Persona: the parallel lives of Charmian Clift*.

**Links**

Listen to *Persona: the parallel lives of Charmian Clift*, ABC Radio feature

<https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/archived/radioeye/persona-the-parallel-lives-of-charmian-clift/3298060>

Listen to Robyn Ravlich reading a chapter about Charmian Clift and Martin Johnston from *Skywriting*, for the Lockdown Reading Group, 2020.

<https://youtu.be/J9d41U1J0Js>

University of Sydney digital library for *Honi Soit* and *Hermes* collections

<https://digital.library.sydney.edu.au/>