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Marcus Clarke: the romance of reality

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Australia's most durable novel, *For the Term of His Natural Life*, places Marcus Clarke at the pinnacle of Australia's literary ancestry. His magnum opus has antecedents in his journalism but few scholars have recognised the extent to which Clarke's reportage influenced his fiction. This paper argues he treated journalism and fiction as companions in language, information gathering, theme and truth telling.

Although Mark Twain called him Australia's only literary genius Marcus Clarke regarded himself primarily as a journalist, albeit a literary one. Through journalism he sought to depict Melbourne as Dickens chronicled London and Balzac sketched Paris. Like his role models, Clarke employed observation and fact finding as tools of social protest. Criticised for being sensational in journalism and melodramatic in fiction, Clarke's sense of audience and commitment to realism showed he was more attuned to public taste than some critics. Journalism gave Clarke more than a meal ticket en route to Australia's first great novel. It contributed the skills, contacts and confidence to seed a new literature for a young country marked by congenital scars from its unnatural life.

Clarke, a transplanted Londoner who spoke fluent French, viewed England's distant colonial outpost from a global — or at least a European — perspective. Journalism encouraged him to think in terms of public policy and its impacts on cities, nations and peoples. In Australia no such policy was more formative than Britain's transportation of convicts. This recognition served Clarke's ambition to write a masterpiece acknowledged as such in his mother country,

which was the source of what Clarke saw as a brutal system that dehumanized its victims and perpetrators.

This article's overarching thesis is that Clarke's journalism enabled his fiction, providing funds to pursue it and the vehicle to refine it. However, it is not argued a good journalist is likely to become a good novelist, or that a bad journalist cannot succeed as a novelist. It will be asserted that *His Natural Life* — the novel's original title — and its journalistic antecedents demonstrate Clarke's commitment to realism and the development of a truly Australian literature.

Journalism and fiction foster cultural transmission, giving a community a sense of self. Therefore when a writer demonstrates skill in each discipline it is worth examining interdependencies between them. However the state of knowledge in this field is not strong: journalism's impact on fiction has not been adequately addressed in Australia. This is especially true given the number of novelists who began as journalists — more than 170 since Australia's first novel was published in 1830.

Journalist or novelist?

In reviewing *Marcus Clarke: An Annotated Checklist: 1863-1972* by Samuel Rowe, Wilding observes that listings of Clarke's own writing take up 44 quarto pages. Sixteen pages are devoted to critical and biographical commentary. Wilding says the checklist traces journalism buried for a century:

What comes through markedly is the breadth and scope of Clarke's writing — something that his great novel, *His Natural Life*, had tended to overshadow. For too long he was remembered only as a one-book writer. There is no excuse for such a misrepresentation now (Wilding 1977, p.97).

Hergenhan (1972, p.xv), who edited a selection of Clarke's journalism published in 1972, argues that much of his writing is worth reviving. This is because of his ability to understand and interpret what has been described as "the parti-coloured patchworked garment of life". Clarke pioneered the regular newspaper column in Australia on local topics that helped him build a reputation and refine his

writing (Hergenhan 1972, p.xxiv). So it was for others, including Daniel Defoe and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Defoe is said to have “invented” modern journalism in 1704 (Whitton 1996, p.11) as well as inventing the novel (Holbrook 1998, p.11). But he was a political commentator long before *Robinson Crusoe* was published in 1719. Sims (1992, p.32) discusses how Marquez’s newspaper columns exhibit signs of narrative experimentation: “He continues to experiment with narrative discourse in his journalistic pieces and keeps adding journalistic and literary elements to his fiction.”

Whether Clarke’s newspaper columns and magazine essays amount to “literature” is a vexed question. According to Hergenhan the matter should be confronted:

Probably no amount of theoretical argument will convert those who believe, often a priori, that journalism is necessarily an inferior form of literature, indeed not worthy of the name at all. The best argument is to offer samples and attempt to discuss their merits and limitations (Hergenhan 1972, p.xxv).

Byrne (1896, p.39) says journalism is the early occupation of many novelists who abandon the profession as soon as they show literary talent. Yet, he continues, Clarke remained a leader in journalism, “a position which would have unfavourably affected the literary tone and ambition of a still more energetic writer”. However, he was not an outstanding reporter. On occasion he was an unethical one: he once wrote a review of a play that he did not attend but learned after publication had been cancelled. Nor did his talents lay in routine police or court reporting or in editing. Three magazines Clarke edited and/or partly owned either went bankrupt or sacked him.

Clarke’s journalism found few supporters among early scholars and commentators. Francis Adams (1893, p.104) said a “slim volume” of Clarke’s writing could be published to supplement his masterpiece. A.G. Stephens contended that while Clarke had an “admirable” journalist’s style it was not always effective from a literary standpoint (qtd. in Palmer 1946, p.11). Walter Murdoch (1910, n. pag.) said Clarke’s “good writing” was more voluminous than people realised. However, he continued, the amount worth preserving was small. Palmer (1946, p.10) describes him as being “weak in detail” and prone

to “sweeping generalisations”. Gyles and Sutherland argue Clarke did not have a reputation for accuracy:

The drudgery of routine press work did not impair his originality, or dull the edge of his vivid imagination; indeed in later years it became notorious that the vivacity of his correspondence with some of the country papers was more attractive than its accuracy, and this characteristic to some extent militated against his usefulness in the soberer duties of daily journalism (1898, pp.311-2).

Clarke, they continue, also had difficulty writing sub-leaders. He could not treat serious subjects in a “judicially argumentative manner” with a clearly structured beginning, middle and end (1898, p.312). He also created headaches for editors by alleging corruption was rampant in every Victorian Government department. Fraser (1981, p.22) concludes Clarke “found it impossible to buckle down to the routine daily life of a journalist”, and Gyles and Sutherland agree Clarke’s “most appropriate” vocation was as a novelist (p.328, 335).

As noted by Wannan (1964, p.xix), who also edited a selection of Clarke’s works, there has been a body of literary criticism in Australia “almost completely unsympathetic, or at least unresponsive, to Clarke’s lesser writings”. In the Sydney *Bulletin* of April 17, 1897 A.G. Stephens said Clarke’s minor works had “no humanity whatever”. They “sparkle coldly, illumined by the head but hardly ever heated by the heart” and do not attempt to “sound the human depths”. In his 1913 *History of Australasia* Arthur Jose (qtd. in Wannan 1964, p.xix) described Clarke as a “brilliant but rather shallow journalist”. Palmer (1946, p.10-11) recorded a remark by a prominent editor he believed to have been David Syme that: “We have half-dozen men on the paper who can write stories as well as Clarke could”. In Palmer’s view Clarke did not have poetic vision: “... though warm of heart in the daily affairs of life, his imagination was always cold; he was the professional, moved by nothing but his own sense of skill”.

Other critics have disagreed. Brazier (1902, p.14) argued that nothing as brilliant as Clarke’s newspaper column, “Peripatetic Philosopher”, had appeared in colonial journalism: “It is really not

ephemeral literature at all but literary art of a very high order.” According to McLaren (1982, p.221), Clarke primarily was a journalist: “He was able to sense a story; he was aggressive and combative, ready to translate his thoughts into arresting words that caught the imagination of the public ...” Based on his books London’s *Daily Telegraph* once offered him a position because he possessed journalistic qualifications of the “highest order”. Elliott finds Clarke to be a “stimulating and versatile journalist” (1958, p.46), although he concludes the routines of a journalist’s life are “fairly humdrum” (1969, p.11).

When just 21 Clarke began his “Peripatetic Philosopher” column for the *Australasian*. According to Elliott (1969, p.7): “Whatever else he might do, he must certainly write; he was immediately recognised as a born journalist, essayist and commentator.” According to Gyles and Sutherland (1898, p.311), Clarke as a teenager was determined to embrace literature as a profession and to enter it through journalism. This helped to develop Clarke’s prose and information-gathering skills, provided a popular forum for his work and afforded a privileged position from which to observe public policy questions. His fiction and non-fiction were pursued within the same journalistic/artistic milieu with journals and magazines being the central spine joining Clarke’s fiction and non-fiction. If themes recurred in each then so did the tools and forums for their development.

This is particularly so in terms of information gathering. Clarke’s documentary approach was evident in his journalism, as reflected in the articles collected in *Old Tales of a Young Country*. It was fortuitous he had ready access to the Southern Hemisphere’s best public library as well as newspaper resources. Historical research also informed his subsequent fiction, demonstrating that journalistic skills employed in his non-fiction contributed to the realism of *His Natural Life*.

Clarke saw journalism as the most effective way to earn a living while writing. However he was more than a journalist and a novelist. He wrote 30 short stories and literary sketches, 40 songs and 20 poems and was involved in writing or contributing to more than 20 plays. To supplement his writing income he also served eight years as sub-librarian for the Melbourne Public Library. Clarke nearly

lost this position in 1874 when his bankruptcy was made public. In many respects the post, which was abolished after his death, was a sinecure:

... in all the time he was at the library his contributions to the newspapers did not slacken. There is some basis for believing that he always regarded his journalism as his main profession, and the only thing he took really seriously at the library was his salary (Elliott 1952, p.8).

In terms of readership/circulation and personal finances it was as a magazine editor and sometime proprietor that Clarke experienced his most spectacular failures. Hergenhan (1972, p.xxiii) observes Clarke lived in an era that saw the flowering of journalism and the English novel. Magazines became popular and, through serialization, helped link and promote journalism and literature. Clarke was aware of this trend in America, England and Europe. It motivated his magazine forays, the best known of which saw the birth of *His Natural Life*.

A natural life in Lower Bohemia

In 1927 the Melbourne Argus conducted a literary competition to ascertain which Australian books its readers regarded most highly. Although *His Natural Life* had been published 53 years earlier it easily allowed Marcus Clarke to be declared Australia's most popular novelist (Nile 1998, p.145). Yet few of those readers would have been aware of the novel's journalistic antecedents. *His Natural Life* did more to fuse Clarke's journalism and fiction than his other works. Wilding (1997, p. 21) speaks of the novel's "massive incorporation of journalism and documentary report". It was steeped in factual detail and strengthened by information-gathering skills, documentation and deadline discipline developed through journalism. Equally important but more difficult to assess are the contacts and public profile Clarke gained through journalism. They assisted him in publishing the serial and the novel. As Elliott argues, journalism funded his fiction:

If he looked to make his fortune out of [*His Natural Life*] he was disappointed. This was nothing new, however; he continually placed

hopes in his writings, but it was only journalism which brought him any substantial income, and that was never enough (1969, p.26).

According to Hergenhan (1972, p.xxviii), journalism helped Clarke build permanence from daily experience and was formative in his fiction's evolution:

Clarke was one of the pioneers who demonstrated the literary potentialities of what was close at hand in the colonial city, and it is interesting that though he could treat it at once successfully and popularly in his journalism, he could not do so in the forms of short story, verse or novel (1972, p.xxiv).

Clarke did not seek to duplicate in his long fiction the themes and tone achieved in his more creative journalism. Yet there are parallels between his convict novel, *Old Tales of a Young Country* and his Lower Bohemia articles. The novel and collected journalism demonstrate Clarke's interest in historical signification. In equal measure, his fascination with societal outcasts is sign-posted in both the Lower Bohemia series and *His Natural Life*.

Clarke's failure as an editor had more to do with management skills than readership judgment. Few editors and even fewer reporters would have seen broad reader interest in depicting Melbourne's lower classes. Otherwise, one assumes, such reportage would have occurred more commonly outside of police and court-based stories. Yet it corresponds to his early interest in Balzac as well as to a serious approach to literature and the search for a universal theme for a major novel. Given Clarke's sympathies, such a work inevitably would be influenced by Balzac and Dickens.

Dickens, he wrote, produced "books of the age". Like Balzac, he relied on journalistic information gathering to inject realism into his narratives. According to Maddocks (1979, p.303), Clarke used such techniques in his journalism and fiction: "Clarke's journalism exemplifies the fusion of direct observation and use of literary sources that dominated his prose style." In "Balzac and modern French literature" (Wilding 1998, p.621,627), which appeared in the *Australasian*, Clarke described Balzac as the "apostle of realism" and the "founder of the realistic school". Balzac created the ground

plan of a new, realistic literature that relied on direct observation. This “new literature” was what Clarke intended to produce for Australia.

Two years after the Balzac essay appeared, the “Peripatetic Philosopher” began the Lower Bohemia sketches. Published in the *Australasian*, they were impressive displays of observation and investigative journalism. Wilding (1977, p.8) said that, in the best tradition of expose journalism, the articles “describe the world of the down-and-outs that most Melburnians not only had never experienced but did not even know existed”. The first sketch, published in the *Australasian* in 1869, was called “A night at the immigrant’s home”. Clarke’s report on the home for the destitute begins with a reference to the Balzac essay, saying Upper Bohemia was a place where “pretty flowers of a prurient sentimentality flourished and bloomed” (Wilding 1988, p.651). He sets apart the middle and upper classes — or most of his readers — from those on the lowest end of the economic scale. In so doing he takes upon himself the Balzac-Dickens mantle of the intrepid scribe interpreting an underworld for an insulated public.

Hergenhan (1972, p.xxxv-iv) is more perceptive than most in drawing links between *His Natural Life* and the Upper Bohemia series. He contends: “... the moving spirit behind Clarke’s descriptions is a compassion for those who live in such unrelieved misery, shut out from human care and sympathy to ‘perish each other along.’” He finds the “quintessential misery” emphasised in the series transcends Melbourne, metaphorically anticipating themes in the novel and suggesting its broader significance as a social fable. Hergenhan concludes:

It is hard to resist the inference that the interest in the types and personalities of the poor and the criminal underworld of Melbourne, in their faces and general appearance as well as their inner states and social significance, also prepared the way for the novel, if not directly suggesting it (1972, p. xxxv).

The series was completed about six months before Clarke began working on the novel. It can be argued that Clarke, in *His Natural Life*, was seeking a larger canvas in which to carry a “man’s-

inhumanity-to-man” message. In so doing he sought to achieve for Melbourne and Australia what Dickens had for London and England and Balzac for Paris and France. Clarke, in the *Argus* of 18 July, 1870, described Dickens as literature’s chief realist (Hergenhan 1972, p.228). Dickens, he said, was a man of the people who accurately expressed the thoughts, feelings and sentiments of the average *bourgeois*. As the poor man’s friend who exposed lower class abuses Dickens: “... painted men and manners, not as they should be, but as they are. His romance was the romance of reality ...”

This phrase recurs in the sixth story in the series — “In outer darkness” (Wilding 1988, p.661) — in which Clarke describes *Robinson Crusoe* as a “superb romance of reality”. The book captivated all classes of readers “because it faithfully represents the terrible duel between one human intellect and the whole dumb savage power of the wilderness”. This is reminiscent of Clarke’s convict protagonist Rufus Dawes, who shows resourcefulness after escaping into the Tasmanian wilderness. It is no coincidence Clarke admired Defoe. Like Clarke, Defoe was regarded by some as a “disreputable scribbler” who was fascinated by factual detail in seeking to edit a “fictional history” (Ross 1965, 8,13).

Clarke was promoting the efficacy of reality by implying the “true romance” is in the actual, not the invented. Even in the days of Shakespeare, he said in his Dickens essay, people “wanted something real. Something about themselves”. But Morgan (1988, pp.244-5) argues Clarke’s main aim was not so much reforming society as gathering material that exercised his imaginative talents. In his view, Clarke was drawn to “the odd, the exotic and the dramatic because nothing in Melbourne stretched his talents”. While this may be true it also seems evident Clarke shared the pulse of justice and humanity that motivated Balzac and Dickens. As Brazier (1902, p.14) remarks, one only need read the “Peripatetic Philosopher” to be “forcibly and finally convinced Marcus Clarke was a man of tender, large and far-reaching sympathies”. Clarke was searching for a novelistic theme to move Australia — not to mention himself — toward a new literary

age. Convict transportation and its barbarism of England's underclass fuelled that ambition.

Journalism in service of fiction

In assessing harmonies between Marcus Clarke's journalism and fiction it is important to consider specific elements that inform both types of writing. These include:

- reader interest or sense of audience;
- point of view or voice;
- tone;
- theme or content;
- impact, or consequence;
- information gathering, or sourcing;
- quotation or dialogue;
- accuracy; and
- deadlines.

Brooks (1998, p.54) says there is no such thing as an "ideal reader". Yet Clarke did not need journalism to recognise reader interest in horror and sensation or to have a writer's sense of the amorphous "general public". But the profession is unique in putting the written word before the public on a regular basis, with consequent feedback on myriad issues. No journalist writes for publication without some conception of reader identification and what impact the reportage might have. This is developed as journalists get feedback through colleagues and public contact, whether via a letter to the editor or in discourse with readers and news sources. Clarke achieved universality in his fiction, at least in part, through his journalism. The profession helped develop his "sense of audience". This, in turn, assisted him in identifying and developing themes to attract and hold readers. Besides providing fodder for his fiction, journalism was Clarke's conduit to public attitudes and taste. Reader response was the 19th century equivalent — however imperfect — of a modern marketing study.

As Clarke wrote in *Humbug* in 1870 under the headline “On the pleasures of editorship”:

I have been called a murderer, villain, a thief, and an infamous and degraded hound, by numbers of worthy people whom I never saw. And scarcely a week passed but I received a note from some respectable butcher, or baker, or candlestick maker, stating “the paragraph commencing so and so” is an “atrocious and cowardly libel” and informing me that the curses of generations yet unborn will be poured out on my devoted head (Hergenhan 1972, 223-4).

Clarke must have felt he missed the mark when the circulation of *The Australian Journal* plummeted during the serialization of *His Natural Life*. Rees (1942, p.102) believes this was due to a popular distrust of local talent. It also may be attributed to a colonial mindset that sought to push transportation out of public consciousness, much as America sought to do with the Vietnam War through much of the 1970s and 1980s. As Wilding (1988, p.xx) notes, one early critic argued Clarke’s novel drew attention to aspects of Australian history best left forgotten. Yet when it was reprinted as a serial after his death circulation increased.

Clarke’s sense of audience was sufficiently acute to keep him in employment as a columnist and essayist. Despite early disappointment his convict novel was said to have been in every settler’s household. It gave colonial Australia a sense of unity through greater knowledge of and connection with a shared history. Clarke produced a character and a story that helped achieve his aim of creating a new and truly Australian literature. Over time it gave his “audience” the opportunity to reinvent itself and possibly even feel better about themselves. According to Dempsey:

... the book’s energy and melodrama helped turn around the conventional view of convicts as thugs and murderers. It was a revision the settlers were happy to accommodate. Rufus Dawes was a romantic, tragic figure; and sure, the convicts weren’t all so bad after all (1999, p.7).

Clarke’s point of view and voice differ markedly in his journalism and fiction. In journalism he was the raconteur, sensationalist, polemicist and satirist. In fiction he was, ironically, more likely to take the role of the disembodied, objective observer more akin

to a reporter's perspective than a novelist's. Rees (1942, p.104) remarks Clarke in *His Natural Life*, "makes the cardinal error of never letting you see into the mind of his hero, and thus denies him the reader's true sympathy based on self-identification". Yet Elliott (1946, p.6) found Clarke was too emotional and confused to be another Balzac: "He had not the detachment necessary for the kind of realism at which he aimed."

In *His Natural Life* Clarke attained realism's aim of recording and reporting what he had uncovered and refusing — as Morgan (1988, p.239) puts it — to saturate the narrative with his own "emotional fancies". This is noteworthy, given his passionate opposition to transportation. Wilding asserts the unemotional, authorial distance achieved in *His Natural Life* contributes to the book's impact:

... the restraint, the detached manner of narration, makes the horror more telling. Clarke uses a similar detachment of manner in his scrupulousness about the precise months and years, and about geographical accuracy. This both emphasises the documentary aspect of the book, and underlines the horror (1974, p.26).

Clarke's life experience — quite apart from his journalism — affected his viewpoint. His mother's early death followed by his father's death when Clarke was just 16 would, of course, have been attitude-moulding experiences. In this respect *His Natural Life* is autobiographical — Rufus Dawes lost his family and inheritance and was wrongly transported to Australia. Wilding (1974, pp.386-87) says the novel's settings reflect personal themes of expatriation and emigration. Clarke came to Australia of his own freewill but only as a result of personal calamity. As Hergenhan (1972, p.xxv) remarks, it is difficult to separate a novelist's social and historical interests from an imaginative work: "... and in journalism, too, the occasion, the means, and the personal viewpoint must be taken into account".

There is a striking binary in Clarke's writing. His journalism served as a clearinghouse for viewpoints sublimated in his fiction. Kerrane and Yagoda recognise journalism's subjectivity-objectivity. They believe an:

... outsized and unabashed subjectivity can be a superb route to understanding. The disembodied, measured voice of the classic journalism is a kind of flim-flam, as the pure objectivity it implies is probably unattainable by humans. By stepping out from the shadows and laying bare his or her prejudices, anxieties, thought processes, whatever, the reporter gives us something firmer and truer to hold on to as we come to our own conclusions (Kerrane and Yagoda 2000, p.4).

Clarke the journalist “stepped out of the shadows” to discover Clarke the novelist. The tone of Clarke’s journalism — especially his columns and essays — often is facetious, playful and opinionated. But as Hergenhan observes, Mackinnon and Wannan omitted from collections Clarke’s more serious and essays and leaders on political and social issues (1972, p.xxxii). This may, in part, be attributed to difficulty in identifying articles without by-lines. However it also may be emblematic of some scholars’ devaluation of his journalism and limited appreciation of how it influenced his fiction. Clarke the journalist too often has been seen as “The Peripatetic Philosopher”, the jocular, ironic man about Melbourne in search of sensation. While Clarke used humour to indict society he also attacked public figures. The consequent high-profile spats were commented upon in other papers and journals.

The difference in tone between Clarke’s journalism and fiction is reflected in his sense of audience and point of view in both genres as well as in his commitment to realism. Authorial intrusion and opinion are inevitable in the kind of journalism at which Clarke excelled. In fiction his commitment to realism required an opposite approach. He constructed stories in which there was room for characters, not authors. According to Dempsey (1999, p.7), if Patrick White, David Malouf or Rodney Hall had been given Rufus Dawes they would have him “trembling with the weight of insight, blinded by his sensibilities and stranded in a poetic haze”. In Clarke’s hands, however, Dawes has survived into the 21st century.

Transportation is the issue most commonly interfacing Clarke’s journalism and fiction. But as a journalist Clarke broached subjects ranging from drunkenness to religion, education, share trading, art criticism and prostitution as well as sundry political issues. Concerns

for such issues are evident in his collected journalism. In many respects they foreshadow and underscore his treatment of what he saw as the century's greatest public policy issue.

In his journalism and fiction Clarke saw himself as chronicler and commentator. Motivating themes in both genres are suggested in *Civilization without Delusion*. In it Clarke criticises creeds that teach the intellect should be distrusted:

The interest now felt in churchmen's disputations will be transferred to discoveries of science. The progress of the world will be the sole care of its inhabitants; and the elevation of the race, the only religion of mankind (Wilding 1988, 682-83).

Clarke concludes by quoting a *North American Review* writer who said if popular enlightenment continued the 20th century would see for the first time a civilisation without an active and general delusion. Within this framework Clarke saw himself as a truth teller. He could use his writing to further the popular enlightenment to which he was committed. The degree to which Clarke regarded news and fiction as concomitant with "truth" and therefore a weapon for "enlightenment" is open to question. Perhaps he would concur with Walter Lippmann: "The function of news is to signalize an event; the function of truth is to bring to light the hidden facts, to set them into relation with each other, and make a picture of reality on which men can act" (qtd. in Epstein 1975, p.3). Clarke saw his journalism and fiction as truth-telling partners. He used each to elevate public consciousness on key issues and so contribute to the colony's political evolution.

Although Clarke's fiction outlasted his journalism one is so reliant upon the other as to be, in some respects, indivisible. Clarke was accused of hyperbole in both. The *Hobart Examiner* said his convict novel was "hideous with realistic ghastliness, nauseous with detail of barbaric torturings, scarcely relieved by any touch of tenderness" (Hergenhan 1971, p.53). However McCann (1996, p.224) asserts, the book's explicitness contributes to its public appeal. Howarth (1954, p.274) interprets the novel as a plea to abolish penal settlements.

Given the *Australian Journal* lost subscribers when serializing the

novel it is no surprise Clarke re-evaluated it when preparing it for book publication. Howarth (1954, p.272) points out the plot was too involved and Clarke made too great a concession to a Dickensian penchant for melodrama. Based on advice from former Victorian Premier Sir Charles Duffy, Clarke altered Dawes' motives and reduced the text's size. It can be argued Clarke the journalist was used to being edited. Therefore he may have been more amenable to change for readership purposes than a non-journalist would have been.

In terms of impact Howarth concludes that *His Natural Life*:

... must have exerted an influence on the public and so on official opinion everywhere, and surely contributed to the gradual amelioration of the convict's lot, especially the growing feel that casting men out of this earthly Eden is no true way of settling their problems or ours. It is thus the first great Australian novel (1954, p.276).

Clarke's journalism confronted Melbourne's hidden social problems through his documentary approach to information gathering. This was evident in his commitment to direct observation as well as in canvassing contemporary debate. Although Hergenhan (1972, p.432) says poverty was not considered a major problem the sketches showed relief agencies were not coping with demand. While newspapers did not operate as a pack in the modern sense, Hergenhan (1972, p.429) contends Clarke's articles on Melbourne nightlife and related social problems broke down press reticence and sparked newspapers into rivalry. Thus, he could take some responsibility for widening public debate on such issues as vice, gambling, liquor laws and poverty.

Clarke's back-street journalism foreshadowed his seminal novel. As Wilding notes, in England Australia traditionally represented the other side of the social coin, and that is Clarke's material:

His novel deals literally with the underworld; the world beneath Europe, the other side of the globe, the bottom of the map: and the world of criminals and prisoners (not necessarily synonymous), the underworld of society that England preferred not to know about and to dispose of. In his depiction of the penal colony Clarke offers a complete counter picture of English society in its systems of authority, oppression and brutalisation (1974, p. 20).

Byrne (1896, pp.72-3) argues *His Natural Life* represents the first and last evidence Clarke recognised the claims made about realism in fiction. He adds his minor writings show “no proof of special preparation” and he found “minute thoroughness” repugnant. Wilding (1974, p.383) contends Clarke’s journalistic research opened his eyes to the potential of fiction in historical records: “He was happy to take the records and adapt, expand and explore them — yet always keeping those holds he could on the documentary records themselves.” Clarke took readers where they normally would not go, whether it be Melbourne’s seediest districts or into the fine detail of convict punishments. In so doing Clarke maintained a journalistic commitment to facts, and was familiar with the obstructions and complications in finding and publishing them. His privileged position as an journalist is acknowledged in “Port Arthur visited, 1870”: “When at Hobart Town, I had asked an official of position to allow me to see the records, and — in consideration of the *Peacock* — he was obliging enough to do so” (Wannan 1964, p. 142).

Aware of the efficacy of direct quotation in journalism he employs idiom-laced dialogue in *His Natural Life* while also quoting documentary sources. Although journalistic quotation often is stilted it can be argued the profession assisted Clarke in developing an ear for realistic speech. Practice may not mean perfection but it usually means improved skill and confidence. Clarke’s journalistic awareness of society’s vivid and varied voices, from tramps to politicians, gave him a privileged position in achieving the heteroglossia as signified by Bakhtin (Bullock & Trombley 1988, p.381). He says novelistic heteroglossia — described as another’s speech in another’s language — represents authorial intention, albeit in a refracted way (1998, p. 40). Yet the same can be said about journalistic voices. Who does one quote? Which comments are used? What is quoted directly and what is paraphrased? Such practice is not foreign to fiction, affording the journalist-turned-novelist an experiential basis for crafting realistic dialogue.

The profession’s — and the public’s — insistence on accuracy gave Clarke more respect for facts than he might otherwise have had. Although not the most accurate journalist, the profession made

Clarke a more careful novelist. In the preface of *Old Tales of a Young Country* he asks any readers who might be better informed to advise him if corrections were needed. This extraordinary request shows a commitment to accuracy, suggesting a sensitivity to error that journalism sharpened. Hergenhan (1972, p.xxxiv) says Clarke's columns on Melbourne's outcasts suggests the sense of kinship he felt with the poor, as evidenced by the sketches' accuracy and restraint.

Combining real people and incidents with government records gives *His Natural Life* peculiar power. That, of course, is a key intent of realism. But Clarke was accused of crossing the line between documentation and plagiarism. James Erskine Calder claimed in a private letter written in November, 1881 that Clarke wrongly used published, narrative accounts from Tasmanian history (Poole 1974, p.423). Calder, a retired Tasmanian Surveyor-General, accused Clarke of "pirating ... from articles first contributed to the public by me". Boehm (1971, p.52) identifies two incidents in the novel in which conversations were lifted almost word for word from two published accounts. He says Clarke made "almost literal transcriptions" of sufferings endured by a number of prisoners and transferred them to torment inflicted on Dawes. As Wilding (1974, p.381) points out, Clarke exploited a certain *roman à clef* public interest in the highly publicised Tichborne perjury trial. It involved claims of impersonation that Clarke incorporated in his plot.

Robson (1963, p.106) contends the novel presented a misleading account of transportation. Yet he agrees Clarke needed to entertain the reader and "was concerned with the dramatic highlights of transportation, not with a dispassionate history of it". The veracity Clarke achieved in *His Natural Life* persuaded the Earl of Rosebery to describe it as "the most terrible of all novels, more terrible than *Oliver Twist* or Victor's Hugo's most startling effects, for the simple reason that it is more real" (Palmer 1946, p.9).

It is not surprising historians have taken issue with Clarke. Such criticism is also common in journalism. Reporters frequently are accused of writing misleading reports because they focus on what is deemed "important" or "interesting". This necessarily means

omitting everything else. Epstein (1975, p.4) argues the divergence between “news” and “truth” stems not from journalists’ inadequacies but from the exigencies of the news business. It limits the time, resources and space available for any one story.

Clarke was not interested in a ponderous account of transportation that would satisfy historians. He manipulated his material to satisfy readers while retaining sufficient factual integrity to satisfy realism’s tenets. According to Wilding (1974, p.26) Clarke’s scrupulousness about using precise days, months and years and geographical accuracy underscore the documentary aspect of *His Natural Life*.

Journalism’s deadline demands instill discipline and efficient work habits in reporters. As a columnist Clarke had a record of reliability. Some have questioned whether this was transferable to his fiction. Byrne (1896, p.74) said Clarke did not have the unbroken industry required to provide a monthly supply of text for the serial version of his novel. It was scheduled to run for 12 months but continued for two and a half years. Mackinnon recorded in 1884 that “the very thought of the trouble given by the eccentric novelist even now causes a shadow to flit over the publisher’s brow” (qtd. in Howarth 1954, p.270). It was claimed the journal’s owners on occasion had to lock him in an office until instalments were produced. Elliott (1969, p.25) questions this report, saying he missed only two instalments, one due to illness. Also, Clarke still had to make a living with his other writing.

Clarke was acutely aware of press power. Therefore, given his idealism, it is doubtful he much regretted his financial dependence on journalism. It provided him a sense of authority in interacting with Victoria’s powerbrokers. In his *Daily Telegraph* article he wrote that the power of the *Age* “is shown by the fact that it can at any time rule an election”. According to Hergenhan, Clarke:

... usually wrote best when he used a firm basis of observed or reported fact ... Though his writing often approached the documentary, it must be remembered that this form when well-used involves more than the simple recording of factual detail ... Clarke may have learned from Dickens to search not only for the telling environmental detail but for the delineating metaphor ... (1972, pp.xxviii-xxvix).

This approach served him in fiction and journalism and achieved its highest purpose in *His Natural Life*. As a universal, timeless metaphor of humanity's inhumanity, it demonstrated the law can make the criminal.

Conclusion

Clarke the journalist was attracted by the prospect of writing a tale based on true stories. Perhaps this is part of what inspired Palmer (1946, p.11) to claim he "had not much original impulse". Clarke, he continued, had little poetic vision or ability to "pour imagination over a thing and make it show a new face". This undervalues realism's power. Societal change is more likely to emerge from a literature that holds up a mirror than one in pursuit of new faces drawn from the imagination rather than from the streets. In an article published in London's *Daily Telegraph* in 1877 Clarke wrote that it had long been fashionable to make fiction serve the purposes of history. This meant presenting Australia as a land of boundless pastures peopled by shepherd-kings:

It is unhappily and prosaically true, however, that there are in Australia a great number of very ordinary, very respectable, and very stupid people, who wear clothes very much like last year's fashions in Bondstreet, who never ride after wild bullocks, and never saw a nugget of gold in their lives.

An idealized vision of life was not Clarke's vision as a journalist or a novelist. He was not, however, opposed to exploiting romantic and melodramatic appeal to make his prose more commercial. His true position is probably reflected in his 1870 Dickens' essay in which he reported that realists had triumphed in *Pickwick*: "Henceforth, nothing was 'common or unclean'" (Hergenhan 1972, p.230). Journalism offered Clarke a canvas and, ultimately, an audience for his fiction and non-fiction. It did not matter that either might be deemed "common or unclean". In his hands each relied on an elevated interpretation of "truth", thereby serving a purpose beyond entertainment, one of journalism's three primary functions. Clarke was more sympathetic to the profession's other two functions: to inform and educate. Whether

in fiction or non-fiction his commitment to these functions was driven by a desire to foment societal change.

Clarke only wrote two novels in 14 years; a “pathetically slender life’s product” (Byrne 1896, pp.15,29). Yet he achieved a lasting place in Australian letters by trying to — as he said Dickens did — present the world as it is rather than how some would like to see it. That is realism’s central aim. It also reflects the aim of the best journalism: a democratic community responds best when armed with facts. Clarke knew this as a journalist and a novelist. Yet he also was a pragmatist in terms of reader appeal. In that sense he was committed to realism and romanticism. Kiernan (1997, p.44) names Clarke as a “colonial romancer” committed to “unillusioned representations” of Australian reality: “Romance and realism co-existed, often even in the work of the same writer who, with a change of mood, could vary documentary reportage with melodramatic improbabilities or sentimental evasions.”

Journalism enabled Clarke’s fiction by giving him confidence and practice in gathering information and presenting it to a mass readership. It also provided a forum for themes to be developed in his fiction. As a journalist he learned that the public would not like everything he wrote. As he said of *His Natural Life*: “It is not a book to be liked but it is true” (Shillinglaw n.d.). In some respects Clarke was like Defoe and Cooper. He took readers where they normally would not willingly go, as in Lower Bohemia, Port Arthur and Australia’s convict past. According to McCann (1996, p.230), Clarke presented Melbourne’s dark side as “an uncivilised wilderness threatening assumptions of European culture”. Similarly, he presented a transportation system and its abuses that had become hidden and therefore foreign to most Australians. In so doing he performed his greatest service through cultural transmission. He kept alive an understanding of Australia’s most formative public policy by putting it in a durable and dramatic fictional context.

Realism calls on the practitioner to convert fact to fiction in service of literature. In that respect a journalist-turned-novelist is more likely than a non-journalist to exploit current events and recent history for fictional advantage. Although Elliott (1958, pp.157,

159) argues there was little originality in *His Natural Life*, pure invention is neither more powerful nor more ethical than adapting and incorporating public records for novelistic purposes. As in any form of writing, the challenge is to tell a compelling story. In this Clarke succeeded with his greatest work, if not always in his short fiction.

Hergenhan (1988, p.xiv) speaks of the social forces — as opposed to individual taste and talent — that influenced the production and consumption of literature in the 1960s. Transposing this argument to the 1870s, Australia was turning away from the recently ended practice of transportation without having embraced its lessons. The same could be said about the Vietnam War. Through the late 1970s and into the 1980s America, and to a lesser extent Australia, achieved a collective amnesia about the marathon war. In a sense Clarke was an early version of Oliver Stone, bringing the lessons of a painful national experience to a reluctant public's attention. But early critics influenced by personal preference for "high literature" misread both *His Natural Life* and the "injudicious" public to which it was targeted. To a great extent they focused on the novel's flawed plot and historical accuracy rather than its wider context in and impact on colonial Australia.

As a journalist and a novelist Clarke demonstrated his idealism and commitment to public service through literature. He saw "high literature" as writing that could make a difference in the public domain. Unlike Patrick White (Lawson 1994, p. 271), who believed writing involved "the practice of an art by a polished mind in civilised surroundings", Clarke accepted writing could a clumsy business with commercial trade-offs. According to Docker (qtd. in Brady 1988, p. 467), literature mattered to the extent that it threw light on social issues. In Clarke's case it also had to be sufficiently commercial to be published and help pay bills.

Realism and idealism were equal partners in *His Natural Life* and in his best journalism, which tends to attract idealists who then are, in effect, trained in realism's strategies. But as Wolfe (1975, p.55) observes and as Clarke no doubt would agree, realism is useless if

it does not illumine a higher reality and support the notion “that literature has a spiritual mission, that it speaks to men unborn”.

His Natural Life came at a time when literacy rates were climbing and newspapers and magazines were gaining unprecedented cultural authority. This combination produced social forces that allowed Clarke to build his skills as a writer and produce a novel that refuses to die. Clarke could have written *His Natural Life* if he had not been a journalist, but it would have been a different, and lesser, book.

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