

Leonard Clark

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Early Life

Leonard Clark was born in 1905 on Guernsey in the Channel Islands. His birth-mother was a governess in London. In a Britain unsympathetic to women who had children outside of marriage, she had gone away to have her child, far from anyone she knew. Leonard, a baby only a few months old, was sent to be fostered by a widow, Mrs Sarah Annie George of Belle Vue Road, Cinderford.

In *Green Wood* he describes his arrival at Newnham-on-Severn station, and being met by the sound of a brass band.

Known as the 'adopted son' of Cinderford, reflecting his origins outside the Forest, his illegitimacy and fostering always troubled him, and he never felt as though he truly belonged anywhere. The Forest, however, became his great passion and inspiration.

He grew up in a loving family and came to think of Mrs George as his real mother in everything but name. Living also with her three older sons - Allan, George and Frederick - he attended St Stephen's Church.

Enjoying music and reading, he was a pupil at Bilson Primary School, then Double View where his talent shone being awarded a scholarship to Monmouth School. Lack of finance restricted his further education so he became a pupil teacher offering a route into the teaching profession.

From his earliest days he was known to his family and friends as 'Bob'.

“From Sarah I learned what love is...about gardens, and birds, and hedgerows...It was she who encouraged me to use my eyes and ears and to wander freely along the country lanes and through the deep woods. Her love spilled over into all she did.”

Green Wood



Green Wood
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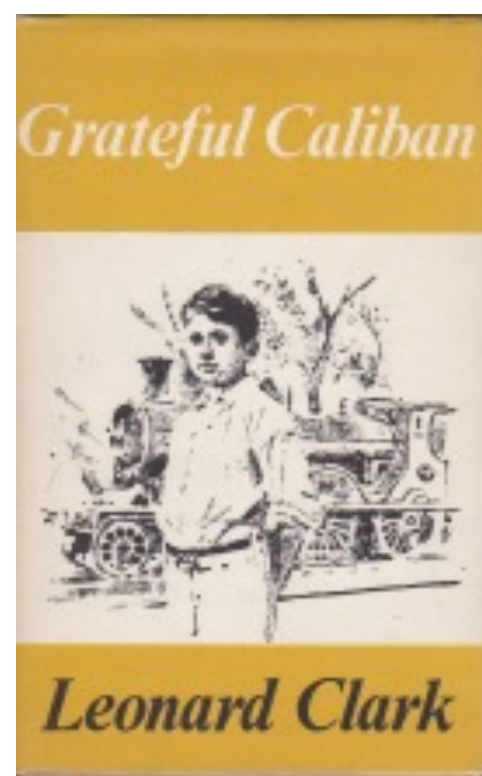
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Becoming a Writer

In his last year at school Leonard met Will Harvey, the Forest poet who took him under his wing.

Will helped him write and publish his first volume of poems in 1923, and Leonard frequently contributed poems to *The Citizen* and *The Dean Forest Mercury* newspapers.

“Will Harvey opened the magic casements of poetry for me. He bequeathed to me his special joy in Shakespeare, Chaucer and Hardy. And he fanned my enthusiasm for cricket and taught me some of its finer points.”



At the same time his teaching career blossomed and at 25 he moved to London to teach at a school in Camberwell. He became engaged to a Gloucester librarian and school teacher, Florence Tobias, and they returned to Cinderford to get married in St Stephen's Church in 1933 - Will Harvey was best man.

They moved to Plymouth where Leonard was made Assistant Inspector of schools.

In 1939 they lost a new-born son, Robin. The couple divorced during the Second World War.

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Remembering the Forest

He returned to the Forest intermittently, notably coming back in 1941 to be with his mother, Sarah George when she died.

After the Second World War he'd moved to Yorkshire. He continued to publish extensively and advised on the poetry curriculum and teaching practice in schools. Later he moved to London, re-married and had two children, Robert and Mary-Louise.

In 1970 he retired as one of the longest serving school inspectors and concentrated on writing and editing.

His first auto-biographical works dealt with his childhood and adolescence in the Forest of Dean. In *Grateful Caliban* he described his development at Bilson, Double View and Monmouth schools, and on the influence of Lilian and John Emery the head teacher and his wife at Double View. In *An Inspector Remembers* (1976) he reflected on his career in education. Much of his later poetry was centred on Forest life and landscape and his early experiences.

“I spent a great deal of my boyhood losing myself in the tangled growths of trees, discovering ancient cattle-tracks and Roman roads on the hills, and wandering at all seasons through open fields”

Greenwood

- *Green Wood* (1962)
- *A Fool in the Forest* (1965)
- *Grateful Caliban* (1967)



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Literary Editor

As well as his own work, he was Editor of the Longmans Poetry Library series, and Consultant Editor of Chatto & Windus Poetry Books for the Young in London, and Thornhill Press in Gloucester.

He wrote for both adults and children, producing more than fifty books of poetry and prose and editing about twenty others.

Early in his career he wrote a biography of Alfred Williams, the working class self-taught poet and railway worker from Swindon.

He was interested in the works of other poets and edited collections of poetry by Andrew Young, Walter de la Mare, and Ivor Gurney.



Poetry for Children

He selected the poems of Andrew Young and John Clare for children.

Always encouraging children to write their own poems he collaborated with *The Sun* newspaper on a poetry competition leading to publication of *Following the Sun: Poems by Children*, (1967), and later *Poems by Children* (1970).

He edited illustrated anthologies for children too, including:

- *Drums and Trumpets: Poetry for the Youngest* (1962)
- *Common Ground: An Anthology for the Young*, (1964)
- *Flutes and Cymbals: Poetry for the Young*, (1968)
- *The Magic Kingdom: An Anthology of Verse for Seniors* (1937)
- *The Open Door: An Anthology of Verse for Juniors* (1937)
- *All Along, Down Along: A Book of Stories in Verse*, (1971).

Inspired by the stories he told his children he wrote a series of Robert Andrew stories illustrated by James Scargill:

- *Robert Andrew Tells a Story*, (1965)
- *Robert Andrew by the Sea*, (1965)
- *Robert Andrew in the Country*, (1966),

Other books for children (illustrated by Toffee Sanders) include:

- *Mr. Pettigrew's Harvest Festival*, (1974)
- *Mr. Pettigrew's Train*, (1975)
- *Mr. Pettigrew and the Bellringers*, 1976

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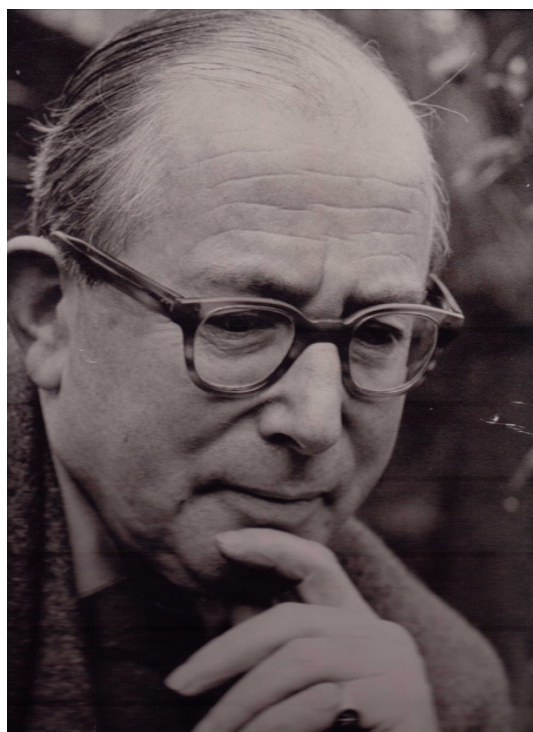
Final Years

He had become highly regarded by many of his contemporaries from the world of literature, and feted with numerous awards and accolades, including:

- Awarded the OBE in 1966
- Literature Panel of the Arts Council
- Westminster Diocese School Panel
- Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature

His later volumes of poetry for adults, such as *The Way It Was* (1980) represent some of his finest work and reflect on his life and particularly his time in the Forest.

In 1980, on his 75th birthday he visited the Forest and featured in local newspapers, where Dennis Potter, Winifred Foley and other Forest authors acknowledged his influence. He used the opportunity to visit childhood places with his son and make specific wishes about his funeral arrangements.



He died the following year and his son returned to the Forest with his ashes. One half were scattered from Symonds Yat viewpoint and the other interred in St Stephen's Church.

“The river still curves to the sea,
the woodlands throb with song,
but the town has changed,
more prosperous, cosmetic,
almost like any other town.
I remember its drabness but also its
pride;
the faces of the colliers have all been
washed white
and something fierce and passionate
gone.

My hope is I am given a last sight of it
all,
skies, fields, riverbank and glade,
before I am finally tidied up for the
night.”

Extract from *An Intimate Landscape*
(1981)

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A Critical Appraisal

By Roger Deeks of *Reading the Forest*

His early work was heavily influenced by Will Harvey, and he even included a dialect poem in his first volume of poems. He clearly looked up to him and modelled his work and outlook on the character of his tutor.

Leonard Clark's poems were written in the Georgian tradition and very structured. This made his work particularly accessible to children for whom he wrote poems around a single theme; ***'poems that have the young in mind, according to their stage of experience, as well as those poems that have been composed specifically for them because they are young.'***

His early poetry for adults continued a theme inherited from the Gloucestershire poets, Harvey and Gurney, an appreciation of beauty in the natural world. He built much of this work around places and people he knew in, and around, Cinderford. Although he incorporated Devon and Yorkshire in his poems, he returned to his favourite Forest places such as Abbots and Chestnut Woods for his best and later work.

The biographical works stand as a slightly sentimentalised and romantic version of Forest life but are none the less applauded as historical sources. His use of chapters to structure comedic stories were later picked up by Winifred Foley and others writing about their own experiences and Forest humour. In his early days he maintained a good relationship with Will Harvey and Harry Beddington although both felt used and deserted by him later in their lives when he lived in London.

Leonard Clark's later work touched on some of the feelings evoked by happenings in his life and had a particular resonance with those who shared his experiences. His poem *Stillborn* is written in the voice of a mother who wonders if 'you rejected us?' and is still widely used by groups supporting people who have experienced a still birth.

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Early Portrait

A country boy,
exiled now in London, bred in Gloucestershire
where Severn flows serenely, the white cathedral tower,
a secure and Norman landmark beneath Cotswold skies.
Brought up among trees, Forrest of Dean,
coal mines glimpsed over heads of foxgloves;
wandered, a dreamer, bluebelled glades all hours, day and night,
knew where foxes hid, once saw a golden eagle;
sang with small but true voice in the church choir, no angel,
with corn-coloured curls could have been mistaken for one,
stocky, sharp-eyed, a fleet runner, eager to please,
very vulnerable, easily brought to tears;
played village cricket, did not excel,
outgoing by nature, knew many gypsies, tramps,
often in trouble, plagued my mother and teachers,
eyed girls nervously, too shy to approach one.
At Monmouth school, scholarship boy, but poor,
Learned the Latin tongue, little French, no mathematics,
a rough and cunning rugby player;
an odd mixture, loved music, poetry,
all strange and rural things, the changing seasons,
had green fingers, an eager, bespectacled reader.

Knew sorrow, disappointment, never hunger,
had perfect health, not easily daunted,
stumbled along somehow, my childhood days,
guided by some light glowing within me,
never lost a sense of wonder.

Aware now though of mistakes I made,
my hot temper and impatience,
grateful for good fortune, home and friends,
loyal to their memory, count my blessings,
looking calmly into the future,
a country boy still,
exiled now in London.

In *The Way It Was* (1980) London: Enitharmon Press. p. 51

The Iron Stream

At the end of the track through the woods
Where hidden eyes peer at you from the undergrowth,
There is a clearing, seen first over heads
Of foxgloves and ramparts of fern;
This is a dead place of buried sound.
And over it oozes an iron stream
Making its brown and sullen way
Into a marsh of swimming trees below;
The half-drowned mole finds company here
With snails slipping from rush and stone,
And rooks quarrel in rotting elms.
But once, before this air was red with rust,
A cottage stood beside a brook that shone
With light that fell from wild forget-me-nots,
A garden bloomed its scented hours away.
And on a jingling carthorse in the sun
A boy rode high the fields of harvest corn.

In *English Morning and other poems* (1953) London: Hutchinson.
p37

I Will Enfold You

I will enfold you
As moss and lichen twine
Hands round mottled stone,
Or curling shoots of vine
On trellised walls are thrown.

I will be one with you
As echoes on a hill
Mingle with silences,
Or tides the hollow fill
To their circumferences.

In *The Mirror and Other Poems* London: Alan Wingate. p36