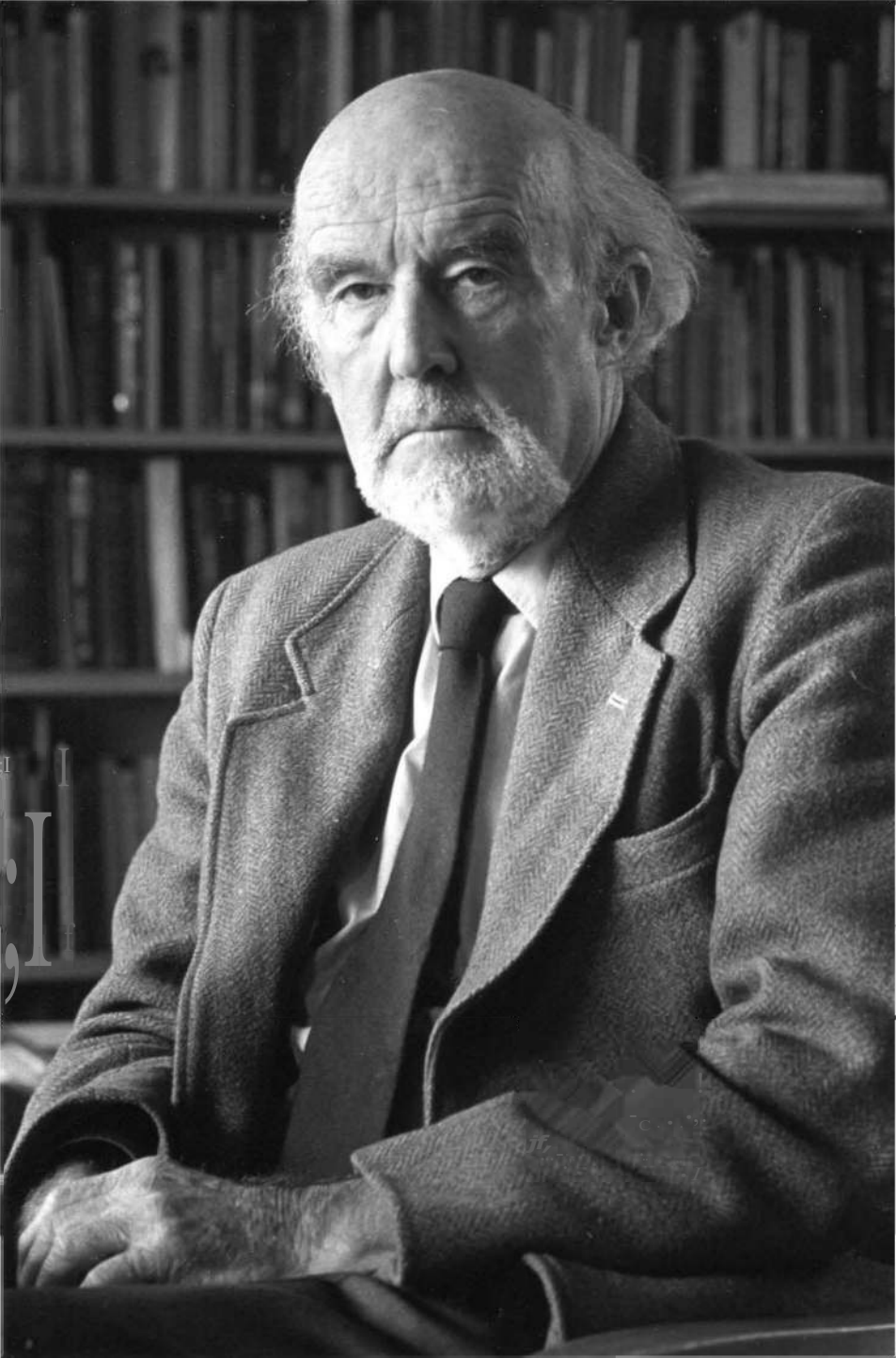

CHARLES MANNING HOPE CLARK AC
1915 - 1991

Manning Clark died in Canberra on 23 May 1991. Descendant of the Reverend Samuel Marsden and son of another Anglican clergyman, he attended Victorian state schools and proceeded on scholarships to Melbourne Grammar School and the University of Melbourne where he took a first class in history. His work on Tocqueville at Oxford was cut off by the war and he eventually gained a Melbourne MA. After teaching at Geelong Grammar School he was appointed lecturer in Political Science at Melbourne in 1944 and transferred to the History department in 1946. From 1949 to 1975 he was Professor of History at Canberra University College (SGS, ANU). Having been a member of the Australian Humanities Research Council from 1961, he was a Foundation Fellow of this Academy.

Clark's prime claim to distinction was as a teacher. In his three years at Corio, as a rebel iconoclast he outraged many of the staff and awakened many of the boys to a critical outlook on life. At Melbourne, we few privileged to take Political Institutions A in 1944 and the thirty-six who in 1946 experienced his initial attempt to teach Australian history were so exhilarated and stimulated that they knew they had the great good fortune to have been exposed to a teacher who fulfilled all their hopes of what a university education might be.

Like his elder colleague R.M. Crawford, he had a rare breadth which was a revelation - breadth in reading of history, political philosophy, European languages and literature, music and the arts, the ideas which shaped humankind. Despite his admitted occasional 'clowning and buffoonery' he was intensely serious. He still thought of himself as primarily an 'apostle of the Enlightenment'. He guided and cared for his students individually, joined them socially in frolic and fun, and was a most generous mentor. At a time when the Melbourne school of history was reaching its peak and attracting many of the very best students of a generation, he began his habit of bonding friendships by scrawled postcards and letters, telephoning, telegrams - such as 'Call no biped lord or sir, and touch your hat to no man' to a student departing for Oxford - which he continued over the years with innumerable friends. In Canberra he built a strong department, deliberately appointing staff of very diverse views.

In 1949 Clark published (with L.J. Pryor) *Select Documents in Australian History 1788-1850* and in 1955 a much larger volume for the 1851-1900 period. These volumes and the *World's Classics Sources of Australian History* (1957) set

a framework for teaching Australian history in universities and schools which remained dominant for some twenty years. The commentaries in his second volume and his inaugural lecture in Canberra began to reveal his 'apocalyptical vision'; most of his colleagues were baffled at the time by many of his comments, but they read today as a remarkably original manifesto. He was already honing his vocabulary for those of whom he disapproved: measurers, dry-as-dust scholars, spiritual bullies, the walnut-hearted, Yarrasiders, sneerers, straighteners (as against enlargers), together with most social scientists, Cambridge philosophers and those who sought laws in history. He had long known that 'only one kind of history was open' to him, 'history which told a story about the past to entertain and instruct the living, to make them more aware of "the field of the possible" for human beings'. Tolstoy, Dostoievsky, Hardy, Carlyle, Newman, Melville, Hawthorne, Thucydides, Macaulay were among his unfashionable guides. Academic history he came to see as 'lifeless, meaningless and false'. His challenging prediction that the rewriting of Australian history would not come from the universities has turned out to be less than half true, in that most of the important works of which he was warmly to approve did come from that source.

1962 saw publication of the first of his six volumes of *A History of Australia* (and in 1963 followed the *Short History of Australia*). His major theme, the clash and interplay between the three great 'visions of the nature of God and man', Protestantism, Catholicism and the Enlightenment, however obvious and reasonable it may seem in retrospect, was startling to most of his colleagues with progressivist and irreligious assumptions. One of the many hostile critics, not an academic, even derided his emphasis on 'little things of the mind and spirit'. As the work proceeded, his tragic view became clearer: his scepticism about 'future-of-humanity' men and women, the futility of the search for happiness, and history as 'the stage of fools'. His assertions that there were 'only two great beliefs in Australia - two tremendous Utopias', as expressed in the *Communist Manifesto* and the last paragraph of the Apostles' Creed, and that he looked forward to the reconciliation of Rome and Moscow, met with general puzzlement. His eventual final volume dwelt on the conflict between the 'Old Dead Tree' and the 'Young Green Tree', as Australia struggled towards independent self-respect.

Despite all its idiosyncrasies, Clark's *History* won increasing respect from his academic colleagues, though many continued to deplore his irritating repetitions, neglect of large areas of Australian history, disregard of the 'state of the subject', inaccuracies and his biographical caricatures (criticisms to which some effective ripostes can be made). They tended to fall silent, grudgingly recognising, as his supporters always had, his claims

to profundity, that he did have 'something to say', was playing in a different league in the degree to which he dealt with the great problems of life and death. The second wave of hostility to Clark's *History* in the later 1970's, some of it vicious, by conservatives in and out of academia, included a few historians. By this time he had become comparatively hardened against adverse criticism.

In his last twenty years, Clark emerged as a sage, a cultural icon, a TV personality, Companion of the Order of Australia, an 'Australian of the Year', in constant demand for lectures, talks, interviews, reviews. Academics with a mission to preach to and teach the public, who have the nerve to so expose themselves and be prepared to offer an instant opinion on anything and everything, and to dress the part, tend to be disapproved of by many of their colleagues, as presumptuous. Yet this is illogical: surely it is desirable for representatives of liberal humanism to compete on the public stage against, and offer reasoned alternatives to, the ideologues, power-seekers and charlatans who shape public opinion. There can be little doubt that Clark succeeded in this appallingly demanding role, judging by the respect and affection he inspired, based on recognition of his reasonableness, tolerant manner, and rare capacity to raise the deeper issues of which many in our largely pagan society are still conscious.

He had eventually become an 'improver', an Australian patriot who saw glimmers of hope for his country. In a period when history has been increasingly under threat as an academic study, as no one else Clark greatly increased public consciousness of Australian history and widened the imaginative horizons of innumerable compatriots.

Strengthened as always by Dymphna and their six children, despite serious illnesses he retained his extraordinary powers of concentration, determination and fluency in completing the final volume of the History in 1987 and two volumes of autobiography, and continued his public appearances to the very end.

Geoffrey Serle

See also K.S. Inglis, *Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia, Annual Report 1991*.