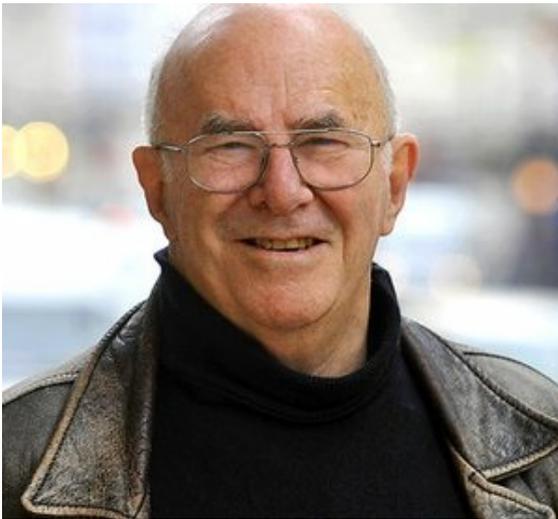


# Clive James AO CBE FRSL FAHA

1939 - 2019



*Wikipedia, CC BY 2.0*

Where to start on the daunting task of writing an obituary for a polymath such as Clive James: critic, poet, social commentator, author and broadcaster, among other descriptors? He had established awe-inspiring reputations in so many fields that the only safe route is to begin at the beginning.

Though 'the kid from Kogarah' became known throughout the English-speaking world (and possibly in other linguistic locations), he was actually born Vivian Leopold James, on 7 October 1939. However, in that year the film of *Gone with the Wind* was released and, with Vivien Leigh's award-winning playing of Scarlett O'Hara, the name, as he wrote in his first memoir, 'became irrevocably a girl's name no matter how you spelt it' and 'little boys saddled with it went through hell.' His mother allowed him to choose a new first name and he settled on Clive, the name of the

character played by Tyrone Power in the 1942 film, *This Above All*.

He was born in the Sydney suburb of Kogarah where, with a brief time in Jannali when he and his mother lived there with his Aunt Dot, he grew up. He had no recollection of his father, Albert Arthur James, who with other freed prisoners-of-war died in a plane crash in Taiwan in 1945. James later described this as the 'defining event' of his life. His mother (Minora May, née Darke) was thus, in his words, 'the only pillar of strength available', and to her fell the task of dragging him off to school. His *Unreliable Memoirs* (1980) brings to irresistible life these early school years and out-of-school activities, such as building a network of tunnels under the garden and other juvenile pranks in a changing neighbourhood.

The educational horizons opened to him at Sydney Technical High School were much less beguiling than, say, sport, 'the Cubs' or 'the pictures', all of which he threw himself into. His obsession with 'the pictures', even to the point of eating glutinous lollies called Fantails wrapped round with mini-biographies of film stars (i.e., fan tales), initiated one of his key career strands: he was early becoming a critic. As a writer, he started a wall magazine at school, inviting others to contribute, though he 'usually decided that hardly anyone's contributions were up to standard except mine.' He writes with a deadpan self-praise that tells us exactly how to read him in his five

memoirs, though our reading is often interrupted by laughing out loud even when alone.

He graduated from Sydney University with an arts degree with Honours in English in 1961, though, considering what else he was doing during his four years there, it is surprising that he was able to spare the time to earn this scholarly outcome. For instance, he directed the annual students' revue, became the literary editor of *Honi Soit*, the student newspaper in which his first poems were published, and fell in with a group of writers and aesthetes who were known as the Downtown Push, or just 'the Push', whose eclectic literary and other interests were regularly lubricated at the Royal George Hotel, and whose other 'members' included Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes.

After landing at Southampton in January 1962, he made his way to London through 'a familiar landscape made strange by being actual instead of transmitted through cultural intermediaries [such as British films]'. His account of a bohemian if rigorous lifestyle involves the difficulty of finding adequately paid employment and moving from one austere dwelling-place to another. As he wrote in his second memoir, *Falling Towards England* (1985), he was at one point: 'Jobless in winter in a paper bag', the latter having contained a mattress bought by a flatmate.

After three years and an unlikely series of jobs, such as library assistant and sheet-metal worker – anything to pay the rent and fund addiction to film, theatre, opera and cigarettes – he was accepted into Pembroke College, Cambridge to read English. The word 'read' needs some qualification: 'Reading off the course was in my nature. My style was to read everything except what mattered.' That he finally achieved a satisfactory degree can only be a tribute to his dazzling intelligence rather than his diligence, because for so much of his time at Cambridge he was preoccupied

with contributing to student periodicals and with the Footlights theatrical club, of which he became president in 1967. As in his years at Sydney University, putting first things first demanded that course work took a second place. He often said that he loved reading anything that wasn't on the course.

His third memoir, *May Week was in June* (1990, sub-titled *Unreliable Memoirs Continued*), chronicles his Cambridge career in which he claims: 'I found my way by getting more lost than ever', and that there: 'I had landed in the lap of the only kind of luxury I have ever cared about – a wealth of opportunity.' He undoubtedly made the most of this latter abundance he found at Cambridge. He wrote masses of poetry, film reviews, whatever was on offer: 'Soon I was appearing in every publication,' he recalled. Shortly after appearing in a number of Footlights sketches, he was sent to London for what proved the disastrous opening night of *The Charge of the Light Fandango*, the revue he had co-authored, but subsequent Footlights 'smokers' attracted serious interest from London agents. The latter, unsurprisingly, were attracted by the likes of Peter Cook, Eric Idle, and others he would later interview when he became a hugely popular TV host.

Perhaps not many people, not even celebrities, have five volumes of memoirs to their name, but as well as the three noted above James later authored a further two – *North Face of Soho* (2006) and *The Blaze of Obscurity* (2009), which documented (though that sounds more 'reliable' than he would have allowed) the television career that made him a household name. As a memoirist, he had a remarkable gift for interweaving the manoeuvres of his wildly diverse personal career(s) with a most resonant sense of the times and places in which these took place and the many others who became part of his life.

For instance, *May Week Was in June* evokes not just his adjusting, as a 'radical socialist', to the very much more conservative culture of the University's historic portals, and its presence as 'an aggregate of colleges'. With never-flagging wit, he shares his reaction to the habits of dons, to the differing demeanours of public school alumni, to colonials like himself, to the odd American's 'newly anglicised diction', and the ferocities of the Leavisite disciples and of their opponents. Mind you, he was himself capable of the odd waspishness, claiming of Leavis that his 'views were almost impossible not to misrepresent, because they were designed so that only he could hold them.'

Despite his reluctance to spend time reading prescribed works when there so many more enticing activities that clamoured for his attention, he did graduate with a better result (a 2:1) than he'd expected – or, in some ways, deserved – and then began a PhD on Shelley. But Shelley never made the claims on his time of other pursuits such as weekly film critic for the *Cambridge Review* or the endless demands of the Footlights revue that would take him to London or the Edinburgh Fringe or his passion for music 'and the very idea of my PhD thesis slipped further back into the past'. He was by now, in his own words, 'a serious writer.'

Another distraction was his marriage to Prudence 'Prue' Shaw (or 'Françoise' as she is known in the memoirs) in 1968, also a Cambridge scholar and rather more devoted to that calling than James. They had two daughters, Claerwen and Lucinda. The marriage broke down in 2012 when his wife learnt of his eight-year affair with Leanne Edelsten, former model and ex-wife of medical entrepreneur Geoffrey Edelsten.

The literary and television world of London would claim the greater part of his subsequent career, and the output as author, poet, critic and broadcaster was little short of

phenomenal. In 1972, he became the television reviewer for *The Observer*. If this weren't enough, there were also seven volumes of his articles, which evince not just the dazzling wit and lethal intelligence of his prose but also the sheer prolificacy and astonishing range of his interests and intellectual grasp.

Take for example, *The Meaning of Recognition*, which was published in 2005, several years after his retirement (to use the latter term loosely). In this volume of 367 densely-packed pages, he ponders matters as disparate as a new translation of *Madame Bovary*, the prickly relationship between press and politics in the days of Blair and Mandelson, the role of philosophers ('they should illuminate realities'), the non-working marriage of Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise as part of his reflection on the function of celebrity in society, or of how 'Australian voices help to project the English language' in an account of some of his fellow artists in the UK. And so on...and on.

The first of his collected pieces, *Visions Before Midnight* (1977), is, in his terms, 'the incidental result of my first four years as the *Observer's* television critic', 'incidental' because he had 'only fleeting notions of preserving any of it for posterity'. Well, he was wrong about that, as his reviews selected here and in the next such anthology, *The Crystal Bucket* (1981) remain as richly rewarding and provocative decades later, full of insight into the range of television offerings and into the period that gave rise to these. Where else would we find so vivid a recollection of, say, *The South Bank Show*, in which everyone from Germaine Greer to Paul McCartney held forth? But it wasn't just media types he dealt with: he was just as astute about politicians and sporting heroes, and he reminds us of such affectionately remembered series as *Morecombe and Wise* and *The Two Ronnies*. Nothing or no-one was safe from his witty

dissection, but he also knew when not to be witty, so that it was always necessary to take him seriously, as well as laughing out loud.

He was, of course, not just a television critic. If he was not already a household name, he certainly was one in the wake of his becoming a TV host in the 1980s of programs in which he interviewed – or duelled with – such comic stars as Peter Cook, Billy Connolly and Victoria Wood, drawing them out on matters political or more broadly cultural. Much addicted to television as a medium, he hosted a number of very popular series, the most famous being *Clive James on Television* (1982–87, for ITV) and *Saturday Night Clive* (1989–90, for the BBC). There were also travel programmes and shows about Formula One racing, one of his many eclectic interests, and in 2007 he began presenting the BBC Radio 4 series, *A Point of View*, which ran to sixty programmes until 2009.

There are two dozen collections of his non-fiction writings, much of them repositories for his critical articles and reviews. As well as the media occupations that commanded so much of his time and energies over the decades following his move to London, he also produced four novels, the first of which, *Brilliant Creatures* (1983), was a witty satire on the city's literary life and the fourth, *The Silver Castle* (1996), the tragicomic story of a Bombay street child who works his way into the Bollywood film scene. There were also seven collections of poetry (from 1977 to 2017), later published in a single volume called *The Book of My Enemy*, and a translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy* (2013), along with six albums of songs for which he wrote the lyrics in the 1970s and a collection of travel writings, *Flying Visits* (1984).

Given his scarcely credible prolificacy, it will be clear why writing an obituary for him could be seen as daunting. It is hard to think of many – indeed any – others who have brought their erudition and creativity to bear on such

an astonishing range of subject and mode of articulating that wealth. This productivity continued after he was diagnosed with chronic leukaemia in 2012, with him writing a weekly column for *The Guardian* until 2017.

In 1992 he was awarded the Order of Australia (AM, elevated to AO in 2013), and was appointed Commander of the Order of the British Empire (CBE) in the 2012 New Year's Honours; there were numerous other recognitions of a unique talent. He died in Cambridge on 24 November 2019.

**Brian McFarlane OAM FAHA**