

Tomatoes, Melbourne Cups and Mark Twain: Sport and the Arts in Australia

The Eighth Dymphna Clark Lecture

Saturday, March 14, 2009

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I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting here this afternoon, the present-day custodians and their venerable ancestors back through the millennia.

Having done my conscientious homework, I am aware of, and deeply honoured by the fact that not only am I the eighth presenter of the Dymphna Clark lecture, but also that I am the first male to be selected. My seven predecessors (Anna and Katerina Clark, Catherine Lumby, Gay Bilson, Anna Rubbo, Eva Sallis, and last year, Prof Kim Rubenstein) have over the years accumulated a heap of runs for the team. I interpret my job, coming in down the order at eight, to throw the bat about a bit to build on an already impressive total. If I can hang around long enough through to lecture's end, be assured that each question from the audience will be answered on its merits. Who said the arts and sport don't mix? Last year Kim Rubenstein began her thoughtful address by pointing out that she and Dymphna, many decades apart, attended the same school: the Presbyterian Ladies College in Melbourne. While I can't make the same claim, I can state that Dymphna and I once shared the same bed. The first MCH Newsletter, of Christmas 1998, correctly points out in the 'Briefly' tidbits on p.13 that (separated by only a few days) Dymphna and I discovered late that year that we had not only been under the scalpel of the same Canberra Hospital surgeon, but that we had occupied exactly the same bed in Ward 9A. Happily, history records that, at that time, we both managed to rise from our beds and walk. Sadly, as the tidbits section further records: 'Another occupant of the self-same bed during the same week was an Australian writer of great panache. Alas, he did not rise again. Geoffrey Dutton died in the hospital on the 17th of September 1998'.

I mention this rather intimate element of our connecting histories because Dymphna, over the following two years, would continue to courageously, privately deal with the cancer that would take her life in May 2000. Most of us were entirely unaware of it. But this was the exact period when her prodigious strength of character, abundance of energy and subtle, team-building drive asserted itself yet again as the wonderful concept of Manning Clark House took root.

Dymphna Clark was a very special person.

Last year Kim Rubenstein also recalled the moving tribute paid to Dymphna by close family friend Bill Gammage at her funeral. During his eulogy, Gammo recalled that another family friend had wanted to write Dymphna's biography but, typically, she had refused the offer. Manning, of course, spent considerable time in later life recording particular aspects of his life's recollections soon published in copious detail. Since his death in May 1991, scholars such as Brian Matthews in his recent, well-publicised biography, have helped us to grasp the complexities of character of

arguably Australia's best-known historian. In the process, Dymphna has-- perhaps inevitably-- been forced from the shadows. But it is certain that, in life, she intentionally chose to be in the background.

In the first part of today's talk, you will have to indulge me a little. I want to dwell on a few small slices of her life-- a life so elegantly, subtly and purposefully lived.

I turned up for the first time at 11 Tasmania Circle early in 1986. Like most younger pilgrims (it was, after all, over twenty years ago, and I had no hint of grey hair then) I had come to meet and chat with the famous historian. Fair to say that I was intimidated. I'd finished a doctorate in Canada a few years earlier and was well into my 30s, but I remember being nervous. Manning did everything possible to put me at ease, but it wasn't until the subject of football came up (Rules and Rugby League) that I started to relax. While I knew something of Carlton's considerable achievements, Manning made it clear that he was keenly interested in the emergence of the Raiders in Canberra as a cultural phenomenon. We got to talking footy. I was on my homeground, with the wind at my back.

Dymphna served us cups of tea, but she stayed in the shadows. Other than pleasantries, embarrassingly I hardly said a word to her. When Manning and Dymphna, and my good mate Dave Carment and I, went to Kakadu (in 1988 I'm pretty sure) I don't think the pattern of my behavior was any different. I remember Manning contemplating one of the most celebrated bits of rock art in the Kakadu region, featuring a particularly well-endowed, ageless Aboriginal man, and casually, dryly observing : 'David, they were a boastful lot, weren't they?' And I chuckled. But I don't recall much more. Dymphna and I must have chatted, although you can be certain that she recognised in me someone who cared at that time only for secret men's business. Fortunately, some years later, I had the opportunity (due to the encouragement of Donald Horne) to start a snug little scholarly and recreation haven called the Centre for Australian Cultural Studies, at ADFA, and that brought me back to Tasmania Circle. The CACS held a number of its early Committee meetings here - and I was fortunate enough to get a second chance to get to know Dymphna - for the first time: tea from the teapot with the re-cycled cosy from a royal blue Manning cardigan; delicious fresh salads up in the kitchen with the just-picked fresh garden produce; ice cream and long yarns at the table, with the spectre of Arthur Boyd's Wapengo Manning looking down; in winter, the grid heater under the table barely enough to thaw your toes. It was bloody freezing, but I couldn't say anything. Here was this amazing, erudite, wise woman next to me, in her later 70s, who never said squeak about the chill. My manhood was at stake. It and I took a beating.

But the yarns around the big table, or the little one in the kitchen next to the fridge, were to be treasured; never to be forgotten. If Manning helped me to see why sport must be acknowledged as a vital part of Australia's rich cultural tapestry, and to come out proudly as a sport historian, then Dymphna helped me to appreciate the art of the tapestry itself. That she was a pure, genuine, astonishingly gifted scholar quickly became clear. Equally, she worked with great strategy to achieve her goals. And one of those goals contained a role for me. You see, probably in the year that we shared a bed, Dymphna determined that the last major piece of scholarship by Manning that was not in print, his MA thesis of the early 1940s, should be 'and she set about showing me and a younger, now Prof John Williams, why we should get on board. In her response to Prof Ann Curthoys' launch of Manning's *Speaking Out of Turn* and Ros Russell's *Literary Links*, also published in the first Manning Clark House newsletter, Dymphna wrote:

"When he has time, David compiles occasional duty sheets for me, to prop up my geriatric memory. He has put a most daunting task on my current duty sheet [the introduction to the forthcoming MUP publication of Manning Clark's 1943 thesis: 'The Ideal of Alexis de Tocqueville'] and [I have to] show him that I am doing at least some of the homework involved "

Don't believe a word of it!! Dymphna conceived of the idea, figured out who her co-editors to be included and educated should be, and then cunningly, wonderfully drove us to publication, like a kelpie with a couple of rogue sheep. I might have had the odd job sheet for her for MCH activities but where the thesis, the book that came to be known as 'Tokkers' was concerned, Dymphna was the inspiration, the catalyst and the patient tutor of men. Incredibly, she even used to include the Big Fella John Williams and I in discussion of technical Tocqueville/Clark translation issues. Now to any fly on the wall this must have seemed like something out of Monty Python. The boofhead, doggedly uni-lingual blokes-- and the soft-spoken, dazzling, multi, multi lingual lady. Endlessly patient. I think Tokkers is a fine little volume. It has the stamp of Dymphna's gifts right next to Manning's, and I recommend it to you.

I was responsible for a spot of editing of it and a ration of republican history in it, but my only major claim in the context of the whole endeavour was that I said plainly to Dymphna, at the start, that I was in only if she would include some autobiographical recollections in the Introduction to contextualise this absorbing period in Dymphna and Manning's lives when the MA thesis was conceived and ultimately completed. It was a small yet significant victory.

I say 'small' because Dymphna's far larger and most valuable legacy is to be found between the covers of a work she translated and edited-- beautifully published by Melbourne University Press' Miegunyah Press in 1994 under the title: *Baron Charles von Hugel's New Holland Journal November 1833-October 1834*. I was fortunate enough, in January 1997, to share a car with Dymphna when the two of us drove to the Blue Mountains to discuss a possible collaboration between MCH and the good folk at 'Varuna', the Artist and Writer's retreat in Katoomba. I say 'lucky' because, on that trip, Dymphna took me right through the Hugel project - its genesis, the enormous amount of work involved and the compelling character who is the work's protagonist. Hugel wrote his journal about the time that Alexis de Tocqueville was putting American democracy under the microscope, and while the New Holland Journal is not of the same premier quality as Tocqueville's master work, it's not a long way behind either. Hugel's work - brought to magical life for an English-speaking readership through Dymphna's exemplary skills as translator, editor, and keen environmentalist and botanist - demands a place among Australian culture's more valuable works. His comments on convictism and the transportation system, on Aborigines and black/white relations, and on class consciousness in the southern colonies are both enlightening and enlightened.

Andrew Clark wrote a moving tribute to his mother which was published in MCH's Newsletter No.4, of August 2000. Early on, he writes:

'From her own parents [my mother] inherited an extraordinary discipline, energy and the maintenance of high standards of scholarship and intellectual integrity. She also drew from them a love of Europe - its literature (particularly Goethe), music (Schubert), and food (Scandinavian and Flemish). There was also a Lodewyckx code of morality, one where you were expected to further the improvement of this earth - its environmental and intellectual health. To be alive was to work, according to this code. She developed her own knowledge of Australia in areas that interested her

most - the Aboriginals, environment, and European, particularly German, associations. Dymphna Clark's inner beliefs were formed, above all, by her own experience of life - her closeness to nature, identity with the four seasons, love for animals, and loyalty and passion for her own family'

I'd like to pause on that last quality, her passion for family, a passion of such breadth that she put her own intellectual gifts more or less on hold for most of her life - and, according to her eldest son Sebastian, a passion so large that, despite a passing interest in sport, she was willing like many a mother to spend those long hours of a Saturday afternoon at the boys' footy and cricket. Baz assures me that, while she was a fair hand at deck tennis, she was hopeless at golf, and a pretty average punter who, on one occasion in her youth, accompanied her boss, a Mr O'Kelly, to the races (and he fancied her a bit). Whereupon, putting a bet on for him, she backed the wrong horse - and it won!!! For we punters in the audience, there must be a moral in that tale somewhere.

Mainstream sport was not really Dymphna's go. However, that fact did not stop her putting a distinctive stamp on my understanding of the unique role and value of sport in Australia - and this through two indelible recollections. First, in one of my later chats with Dymphna I mentioned that Canberra's capacity to produce early Spring frosts was an issue for me because I did not know when to plant my Grosse Lisse tomatoes. Sagely, she informed me that those in the 'know' in the nation's capital well knew that you didn't plant your tomatoes until Melbourne Cup day. How many countries, I later pondered, would directly, organically connect successful vegetable production with a horse race?? Only here.

And second, I remember Anna Clark, probably at the first lecture in this annual series, fondly recalling that she and her grandmother managed to secrete some treasured soil from the goal square of Princes Park oval, Carlton's home ground, in order to pour it around Manning's headstone at the Northside Crematorium in Canberra. Not just that but, later visiting the site, they returned equipped with scissors to shape and nurture the emergent new shoots of grass.

Now while I am ready to admit that such contemporary tales of sport's luminous life applications are told and re-told in many countries throughout the world, the special circumstances of social, cultural and political development in the Australian colonies in the nineteenth century - and sport's role within that development - do help us to better understand why a sod of Melbourne dirt was transported to re-invigorate and replenish the surrounds of a significant cultural gravesite in the nation's capital.

These special circumstances, I would argue, have created a fertile relationship in Australia between the arts and sport. [What followed was a series of readings from, and comments on, a book I compiled a few years ago entitled: "The Best Ever Australian Sports Writing: A 200 Year Collection".]