

Somewhere other than Hydra? An alternative history of the Johnstons in Greece

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What if Hitler had won World War II? Or if Australia had been colonised by the French? I love these sorts of alternative histories because they can prompt us into new ways of thinking about what actually took place.

On a more mundane tack:— What would have happened if Charmian Clift and George Johnston had made their home in Greece *somewhere other than the island of Hydra?*

This question was on my mind recently when I visited the port-city of Nafplio, on the Gulf of Argos. Although these days the area of the Old Town is dominated by shops selling tourist-tat and gelato, my memory was able to map it back to how it was in the mid 1970s, when I used to visit the place in the company of Martin Johnston. At that time, we were living down the coast in the village of Paralio Astros; once a month we travelled by bus to Argos to do our marketing, and sometimes we made a side trip to Nafplio, just for fun.

‘We nearly ended up living here,’ Martin always said as we wandered the narrow streets lined with crumbling stone buildings dating back to the time of the town’s Venetian occupancy or gazed out through the arrow-slit windows of the Palamidi to the breathtaking panorama of coastline and sea. ‘We almost came to live here...’

But because I was young and living in the present, I never thought to ask him why that might have happened, or why it did not happen, or whether Martin felt his parents’ lives (and indeed his own life) would have been different if the family had

lived in Nafplio rather than Hydra. It was not until many years later, when I was writing *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift*, that I even unravelled the back story of how the Johnstons came to live in Greece...

I have to start with George. Growing up in suburban Melbourne in the years following the Great War, he was a bookish boy who fell in love with archaeology by way of stories in the colour supplements about Heinrich Schliemann's discoveries of Mycenae and Troy. At a slightly later time, Charmian's love affair with Greece was also 'founded on a sort of romantic bookishness', which was 'fed through the years on Sophocles, Homer and Thucydides, Strabo and Herodotus'.

After moving to London with their two young children in 1951, the couple used Johnston's annual springtime leave from his newspaper job to make a couple of trips to northern Europe. No sooner were they back from their 1953 holiday than Johnston wrote to his editor at Faber & Faber asking for a copy of W.A. Wigram's *Hellenic Travel* which 'we desperately need because Charmian and I are planning a trip to Greece within the next twelve months'. In addition to Wigram's guide book, the couple embarked on a serious re-reading of Homer, backed up by works of Greek mythology and history. Their obsession soon spread to six-year-old Martin, who — when his parents set off to Greece in April 1954 — gave them a letter to pass on to Perseus.

If Martin could write to Perseus as other children write to Santa, his father's attitude was nearly as credulous. Describing in a feature article how he and his wife went 'holidaying with Homer', George Johnston assured readers that 'You can find the myth and magic' of Ancient Greece, but 'There is an act of faith to be performed first:

you must *believe* in Homer... You must believe that he is dealing, in essence, with historical truth'. George's boyhood idol, Heinrich Schliemann, could not have said it more fulsomely. The awe-struck Australian went on to describe how, during this pilgrimage, he had 'caught local buses on the road that the Seven Against Thebes marched along, that proud and unruly Alcibiades drove along on the way to the Nemean Games'.

The headquarters for the first week of this Homeric holiday was Nafplio — convenient to the archaeological sites of Tiryns, Mycenae and Argos, and to the mythic homeland of Perseus and Agamemnon. Within walking distance of the town there were beaches, where Charmian could enjoy sun and sea for the first time in four years, and the couple also delighted in 'the fairyland beauty of the old Venetian harbour', with its graceful mansions perching precariously along the terraces of stepped laneways that thread their way up the hill to the twin fortresses of the Acronafplio and the Palamidi.

Over the next four weeks, the travellers moved on to 'fill in the gaps' at the ancient sites of Sparta, Pylos and Epidavros, before venturing to the islands of Aegina, Rhodes, Patmos, Delos and Crete. Returning to the mainland, they made their final stop at Delphi, where it was 'almost impossible to doubt' that Homer had come to wash himself in the 'clear waters of Castalia' before walking 'on ahead of you, slowly, climbing up toward the sacred place'.

Although, in this travel piece, George Johnston laid on the local colour with a trowel, there is no doubt that his feelings about the journey were sincere. For Charmian Clift, meanwhile, this first experience of Greece was 'as overwhelming as only love at first sight can be'. Surely it had to be possible to find some way that the family could leave London and live in this country where Shane and Martin could run

free, as Charmian herself had done when she was growing up on the south coast of New South Wales. And just think of the educational opportunities! Australian artist Cedric Flower, who with his wife Pat was staying in London at the time of the couple's return from Greece, would recall them raving about the benefits of taking the children to the source of culture. And Charmian's friend and neighbor, Jo Meyer, told me:

It was because of Martin's intellect that the family decided to go to live in Greece. His intellect could be channeled into learning a new language and strange customs instead of getting bored in a school where his fellow pupils were still learning to read.

The aim was also, of course, to move to a place where George Johnston and Charmian Clift could live as full-time writers, as they had always wanted to do. But when and how did Hydra get into the dream?

In the 'London, 1954' section of his novel *Clean Straw for Nothing* (written in Sydney towards the end of the 1960s), George Johnston recounts how his *alter ego*, the author David Meredith, is fed up with the rat race of journalism. "“Why don't you get out of it then?”" his wife Cressida Morley (not a writer) demands. After Meredith agrees that it is up to him, alone, to decide, the couple say 'nothing more about it'. Then 'in the event, two factors, at that time unforeseen', force 'the decision'.

The first is a chance introduction by Meredith's friend Tom Kiernan (based on the painter Sidney Nolan) to an elderly woman who urges Meredith to go to Greece, and recommends 'an unfrequented little island in the Aegean' where 'the most wonderful old houses could be bought for twenty or thirty pounds'. "“You should find a place like that where you can get away from all this and try to

write something worthwhile,” she tells Meredith.

Consequently, when a novel by David Meredith has ‘a modest success’, the couple use the money ‘to take their next holiday in Greece’. After a truncated listing of places visited (including ‘the plain of Argos’ but not Nafplio), Johnston describes how ‘they found, on a bright blue blowing day, the island the old woman had told them about’. In the scene that follows, the couple’s passion for each other is so evident that the proprietor of their ‘crumbling waterfront hotel’ asks for their passports, ‘suspecting them to be illicit lovers and not man and wife’. The ceiling of the hotel room, with its ‘flamboyantly painted’ picture of Phoebus Apollo, and the view of the waterfront from the room’s window, are part of this crucial episode in which the Merediths ‘find’ their island-home (not named in the novel) during their 1954 trip to Greece. I believe in the epiphany, but not in the date.

It is true that, at some time before the couple were planning their trip to Greece, an elderly female friend of Nolan’s recommended Hydra to them. And as the island is only a short boat trip away from Nafplio, Johnstons could have popped across for a visit. But I am sure they didn’t. Hydra is not included in the list of islands mentioned in the non-fiction ‘Holiday with Homer’ article, and (as we will see) this is a place where the fiction of *Clean Straw for Nothing* departs from fact.

Rather than considering Hydra, the Johnstons at this stage were firmly committed to Nafplio as their future Greek home. Although they were given to impulsive decisions, they were also practical people, and their care for their young children was always paramount. In addition to Nafplio’s beauty and its proximity to the Homeric sites of the Argolid, the little city (which had briefly been the first

capital of modern Greece) was a thriving commercial center that offered schools, doctors, dentists, banks, electricity, and a regular postal service. And Athens was only a couple of hours away on the bus.

If the couple were to survive as full-time writers, they needed money. By selling many of their possessions, and by persuading Johnston's employers to give him in cash the price of the family's return fare to Australia, they managed to scrape up enough to bankroll a year of writing time. But what would they live on after that? As Clift explains in the American edition of her travel memoir

Mermaid Singing:

The trouble was that besides a place to live we [needed] an initial writing project that would occupy us for the first six months or so and provide some sort of insurance against our second year, when we might well have come to the end of our financial resources.

It was at this point (around September 1954) that a radio producer friend, knowing the couple's interest in Greece, invited them to the BBC studios to hear a program he was making about the Australian government's scheme to invite sponge divers from the Dodecanese island of Kalymnos to come to Darwin to dive for pearls. 'Fired by the story', the couple decided that it would provide them with material for a novel that could bank-roll their long-term venture.

And so it was to Kalymnos, not Nafplio, that the family moved in late 1954. There, over the first few months of 1955, Johnston wrote *The Sponge Divers* with the aid of Clift's research notes, and Clift turned those same notes into her first solo book, *Mermaid Singing*. The summer that followed that extraordinary work stint was the happiest time the couple had spent together since what they regarded as their 'honeymoon' in Kiama, during the Australian summer of 1947-1948.

‘Why on earth didn’t they stay on Kalymnos?’ my Kalymnian friends ask me.

‘After all, there is everything you could ever want here.’

I agree. But when Pat and Cedric Flower came to stay with the Johnstons around late July 1955, they were not at all impressed with the island. As Cedric explained to me:

Pat had a long talk to Charm and said, 'Charmian, you can't live in this primitive awful place any longer, you know. Suppose the kids get sick...! There were no doctors, no dentists, no nothing. And they'd finished the novel. They had no further cause to be there.

From the evidence of *Mermaid Singing* and also letters to the author’s London friend Jo, I don’t think the ‘primitive’ facilities of Kalymnos bothered Charmian. The insurmountable problem was the isolation. In order to survive as writers in Greece, Clift and Johnston needed to be able to be in touch on a daily basis with their agents and publishers in the United States and the United Kingdom. And Kalymnos — situated as it was on the eastern edge of Greece, and dependent on good weather for the arrival of *caiques* from Kos — had no reliable postal service.

Concluding his account of the advice he and his wife had given to the Johnstons, Cedric recalled: ‘So *we* said, “We'll look after the kids. You go and find somewhere civilized”.’

No sooner did the couple set off than a major earthquake in the mainland town of Volos sent shock waves down the Dodecanese to Kalymnos, where the Flowers suddenly felt anxious about the responsibility of looking after Shane and Martin. Then two telegrams arrived for George, who couldn't be contacted.

After about five days (Cedric remembered), the travellers returned, raving

about how 'they'd found this *marvellous* uninhabited island called Hydra. And they'd rented a house and it was to be up stakes and off!

The word 'found' is instructive. My interview with Cedric Flower took place some four decades after these events but his recall (even of dialogue) struck me as crystal clear. Surely it was actually during *this* trip that Clift and Johnston 'found on a bright blue blowing day,' the island that Sidney Nolan's elderly friend had told them about. And just as surely it was now that they had the night of passion in the Hotel Poseidon, which the author shifted back into the Homeric Holiday in *Clean Straw for Nothing*. The reason for this date-shift is that Johnston sped up the narrative of his novel by omitting the nine-month sojourn on Kalymnos and setting all the Greek passages on the one unnamed 'Island'. Thus in the 'summary of the last five years' that David Meredith makes in 1959, the couple arrive on this one island for their 'first year' in Greece; there could be no expedition in the summer of 1955 to find a *new* island-home — because they were already there!

Certainly, the couple gave the Flowers no indication that they had laid eyes on Hydra previously, and the description of the place as 'uninhabited' shows that even this visit was cursory.

Perhaps Charmian (or Cedric) meant 'undiscovered', but this was hardly the case. While Hydra in 1955 was a far cry from the tourist hub it would later become, it was well and truly on the map. International artists regularly stayed at a government-sponsored Art School, and the Greek artist Ghika (Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas) owned a grand 18th century mansion where his house guests over the years included Henry Miller, Lawrence Durrell, George Seferis, Stephen Spender, Margot Fonteyn and Patrick Leigh Fermor. Hydra was also

already a yachting resort for Athenian millionaires. But obviously when Charmian and George looked out their hotel window in August 1955 the waterfront appeared to be that of a sleepy seaside town.

The significant question here is why the couple went looking for a new place to live at all. Why didn't they just go back to Nafplio and look for somewhere to rent there? I think the reason is that, during the time on Kalymnos, they had been infected by the island-bug. Hydra offered the romance of island life, together with an architectural beauty equal to that of Nafplio, and also the convenience of Nafplio's proximity to Athens, albeit with the daily steamer replacing the bus.

But for all Charman's enthusiasm, Hydra might have been merely another staging post, if it were not for the conjunction of three things that were unforeseen at the time of the house-hunting expedition.

One of the telegrams that had arrived while the couple were away was from George Johnston's former London newspaper office, asking him if he would go to Volos for them and report on the aftermath of the earthquake. It was nice to feel wanted. And even nicer to be able to refuse — 'on principle' (as the writer notes in *Clean Straw for Nothing*). After crossing this Rubicon, there could be no return to the newspaper world.

In fact, Johnston (always mindful that he had a family to feed) took this rash step because the second telegram carried the news that one of his recently-written short stories, 'The Astypalaian Knife', had been sold by his American literary agency to *Cosmopolitan* magazine for the extraordinary sum of \$US850 (equivalent to \$US9700 today). This seemed to validate the couple's decision to live in Greece as full-time writers. Beyond this sense of confidence, it also gave

them a pot of money, which they were eager to spend.

But it was the third unplanned and unexpected circumstance that caused the couple to make the ‘commitment’ (Clift’s oft-repeated word) to life on Hydra. By the end of September 1955 — by which time the Johnstons were living in their rented premises on the island — Charmian knew she was pregnant.

Although she burst into tears when she told Pat Flower about this, for both Charmian and George this unplanned conception of their third child was a physical proof of the renewal — in their relationship, and in their professional lives — that had begun since they’d moved to Greece. It sealed their ‘commitment’ (that word again), to each other and to the family unit, and this in turn led to the kind of grand and romantic gesture that Charmian loved.

Why not buy a house, so that the family could live in a home of their own for the first time? But how could they afford a house? With no such thing as a mortgage available, there was only the windfall money from the sale of the short story, and that would be needed for Charmian's confinement. There was no doctor on Hydra, and George was determined that his wife should go to a hospital in Athens for the birth. It was Charmian's idea, however, to use this money to buy a house, and then forget about obstetricians and hospitals and have the baby at home, with only the assistance of the local midwife.

And so, from the first weeks on Hydra, Charmian and George started looking for a permanent home, and in February 1956 — as Clift recorded in her just-started second travel memoir, *Peel Me a Lotus* — they handed over all their money in exchange for the place would become known on the island as ‘the Australian House’.

There it went! Our last little bit of capital, our going-back-to-civilisation money, our reserve against children's illnesses, tonsils or appendix

operations, dental disasters — or that never-mentioned contingency that might arise if all does not go well at the birth of this new baby of mine and I have to be carted off dramatically to Athens in a *caïque*.

Little wonder that, standing at the back of Katsikas' grocery store half an hour later, she found her mouth 'gone dry with surprise and terror' as she realised that 'in spending all our capital we had indeed burnt the last boat. Had one really intended to commit oneself so irrevocably?' But for Charmian, the question was rhetorical. The next moment she was happily reminding herself that 'This is the island to which we are committed'. In early April, the gamble seemed to come off when Jason was born in the house with no dramas (except for those on the battlefield of Troy, as related by Martin, who sat at his mother's bedside reading the *Iliad* out loud to her).

The rest is, as they say, history. Except for a short and miserable few months in the Cotswolds, the Johnston family would remain in their Hydra house until they returned to their homeland of Australia in 1964.

But would Charmian and George have remained on Hydra after the first summer if they had not plunged all their cash into 'the house by the well'? The evidence provided by *Peel Me a Lotus* (written month by month, as the events unfolded) suggests maybe not.

Through that spring of 1956, the author happily describes life in the new house with the new baby, and in June she declares that 'living has become infinitely more pleasant and less complicated now in summer'. In July, however, she demands of herself and of the reader: 'Did I say I was glad to be committed? What ignorant chattering.' Over the author's account of the coming three months, a series of difficulties emerges:

1. *Money, or the lack thereof.*

By July, the arrival of the authors' royalty statements had brought the couple 'face to face with the plain bleak realisation that perhaps we are to go on being poor'. With all their money tied up in the house, there was no escape route. 'Incredulously we try to accept the fact that we really are marooned, castaways on a little rock.'

2. *The physical environment of Hydra in summer.*

'Sometimes, looking out at noon at the brazen, clanging mountains, I am secretly appalled,' the author writes.

It is a terrible landscape. Mummified by heat, all the juices dried out of it, naked, hairless country...

And where has our patience gone, our good humour? We are nervous, inclined to irritability, to sudden explosions of violence; we are captious, querulous and tired.

This account is similar to the description Clift gave in *Mermaid Singing* of George's state of mind while they were living in London. But now it is both of them who are frazzled.

3. *The decadence of some members of the foreign colony*

The author goes straight on here to describe some of the island's expatriate residents. After words like 'degradation', 'disintegration', and 'corruption', she demands: 'Are these our spiritual brothers?'

4. *The claustrophobia of island life*

'Inevitably we all meet again, and yet again. We are endlessly meeting... the same people over and over again, endlessly meeting.' (Clift's ellipsis.)

5. *Tourists — and worse*

The 'August' chapter begins: 'Day by day the heat increases, and day by day the ships ... unload their quotas of family holiday parties from Athens,

tourists from everywhere, and artists for the School'. By September, a film crew is arriving 'like an invading army'.

All of this cast such a pall over the brave venture that the author tells herself:

Thank God we are marooned, that there is no question of going back. If there was a chance of escape I suspect that George might take it. He was never made to fight a holding action... It's hard for him to be caught like this. I watch him sometimes hating the mountains. He looks baffled, uneasy and afraid.

For George Johnston, this sense of loathing — of people and place — became worse as time went on. The five-year 'audit' that David Meredith makes in the 'Greece, 1959' section of *Clean Straw for Nothing* concludes with the stark observation: 'Wish we were somewhere else, but how do we get the fare out?' But the journal-format of *Peel Me a Lotus* makes it clear that Charmian Clift was also having second thoughts about Hydra as early as this first year. Although in the final chapter ('October'), a week of steady rain fills the water cistern and lifts the spirits of writer and reader alike, the family's 'snuffling and sneezing' brought on by their dancing naked in the first downpour is an unconscious harbinger of the pneumonia that would beset George Johnston over the coming winters in a house that was expensive and difficult to heat.

With the benefit of hindsight we can see, by the end of 1956, many of the factors that would play out over the rest of the Johnstons' time on Hydra: the hand-to-mouth economic situation; the decadence of many members of the foreign colony; the disruptiveness of the summer tourist season; the claustrophobic atmosphere of island life; the exhaustion caused by dealing with primitive conditions ranging from long-term water shortages to the daily pumping of water; George's health problems; Charmian's frustration at the lack of working time.

Charmian Clift and George Johnston did not, of course, have the benefit of hindsight. But *we* can wonder what might have happened if they had made their Greek home somewhere other than the island of Hydra.

Nafplio perhaps...

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For references for this article, see *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift* (HarperCollins, 2001).