



The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift

Nadia Wheatley

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The details of Charmian Clift's life have often been in danger of overwhelming an appreciation of her work, and in this biography, Nadia Wheatley peels away the myths to give us the real story of Charmian's life and work. So many details of her life were taken by her husband, George Johnston, and used in his novels "My Brother Jack" and "Clean Straw for Nothing", that it has been difficult for readers to know where fiction begins and where the truth lies. Charmian Clift was born in Kiama in 1923, and after a stint in the Army during the war, became a journalist on Melbourne's "Argus" newspaper. There she met and fell in love with the dashing "golden boy" war correspondent, George Johnston. However, as George was already married, their affair caused a scandal, which resulted in their both leaving the paper and moving to Sydney. There they collaborated on their first novel, "High Valley", which won the prestigious Sydney Morning Herald prize in 1948. They became the sparkling centre of a circle of writers and artists, and during this period their first two children, Martin and Shane, were born. In 1951 the family moved to London, and in 1954 to Greece. Greece represented freedom from the constrictions of conventional life and marked a serious commitment by both Charmian and George to make their way as writers. During the nearly ten years they spent in Greece, Charmian wrote two books about their experiences, "Mermaid Singing" and "Peel Me A Lotus", and two novels, "A Walk to the Paradise Gardens" and "Honour's Mimic". On the island of Hydra, they became the centre of a loose group of expatriates and travellers and rubbed shoulders with the likes of Sidney Nolan and Leonard Cohen, as well as a young Rodney Hall. The details of Charmian and George's private lives in Greece inspired a good deal of gossip and helped fan the flames of the image of Charmian the sexual free spirit. When George wrote his classic novel "My Brother Jack", Charmian was literally beside him every step of the way, and one of the things this biography reveals is the nature of this unique literary partnership. Johnston and Clift wrote three novels together, but their literary partnership did not stop there. The character of Cressida Morley in George's "My Brother Jack" and its sequel "Clean Straw for Nothing" was based not simply on Charmian herself, as many assume, but on a character Charmian had been moulding in her own fiction. In this biography, Nadia Wheatley untangles fact from fiction, and gives us both a portrait of an immensely talented woman, and the unique literary partnership she shared with George Johnston.

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