

YOU'LL DO ME NINETY-ONE

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Today has been one of those days when you think all your birthdays have come at once. Not that I got given anything that you might regard as being of material worth. Instead I just attended a couple of lectures at ANU.

This morning Manning Clark lectured on Henry Lawson. This is not the first time that I've seen him lecture; the first time was earlier in the year when he spoke on W.C. Wentworth.

Manning Clark is by now a reasonably old man, but he carries his age well. He has gone partly bald but has a good growth of white hair and a small white beard as well. He wore a blue three piece suit and in every way looked to be the personification of intellect and of civilisation.

His voice is quite and has the marks of age. But it is the voice of great authority, of a person who has spent their life in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom.

The lecture was given without notes, Manning Clark paced the floor before the lecture podium as he talked, rarely still, rarely pausing in his restless motion as he spoke. Occasionally he would stop in mid stride as a thought came to him or would turn to his audience and stand poised as he recited a few lines of Lawson's verse. The restless energy of the lecture drew in the audience, the continual movement became almost a performance, the movements and the poise of the body also being an expression of the things that he was trying to say in the lecture.

Perhaps Manning Clark is fortunate in that he does not have to lecture full time and therefore does not have to take part in what must be a mind numbing routine. On the other hand, perhaps he has always been as exciting as he was today to listen to and if that is so it is no wonder that he has such a great reputation. Most lectures that I have attended have passed on information - some lecturers are better than others - but as well as doing this Manning Clark also passed on to his audience a feeling of great emotional intensity. In expressing what he knows on a subject he attempts to not only speak on the facts as they are known and the relationships between people and events... he expresses the humanness of a person.

In telling about Lawson taking his walking stick to as many windows of the office of the BULLETIN as he could, Manning Clark was more keenly interested in helping his audience to feel the kinds of emotions which might drive a man to such actions. In discussing Lawson and his decline, the emphasis was not on the fall as such but on the personal tragedy.

The trouble which most of us experience is that we can only tell others about things; there are some gifted people who can make people feel things emotionally, they can pull at the heart strings. Mozart used music, Roberts used painting, Lawson used literature and Manning Clark uses the study of history. In each of these fields these people are masters.

Listening to Manning Clark is not only an educational experience, it is a moving one.

The lecture concluded as Manning Clark described Lawson's funeral. Lawson is buried in Waverly Cemetry and in that beautiful place overlooks the great Pacific Ocean. Manning Clark alluded to that ocean, drawing together with Lawson the great voyages of exploration which led to the gradual discovery of the Great South Land, called up memories of the great and dangerous jounries made by the earliest colonists, the convicts, the squatters, the diggers.

He then spoke about the

significance of the hymn played at the funeral "Abide With Me", and quoted its final lines, inferring their relevance to the beliefs that Lawson had expressed and that love that he had expressed in his writing... Manning Clark then appended to this closure a two or three sentence statement of Lawson's great stature in Australian history and literature... a punch line of the most telling impact (which would be rather pointless quoted here) and he strode out of the theatre.

I could probably say a little more about Manning Clark, particularly the way in which he constructed his lecture as he progressed.

However, this afternoon as part of the Political Science course I attended an informal discussion session with Gough Whitlam. This person is still well enough known to most of you not to need a detailed description.

Whitlam is still a man of commanding presence but these days seems much more human, perhaps this is what comes of being without his political power. His voice is a little changed from its former glory and the power of his intellect is still massive. But he is a person who seems much more at peace than he used to be when he was in politics. When he comments in passing that "We introduced Medibank", or "We were the greatest reforming Government in the history of the country" or "My Government did" this or that, they are statements made by a person who is so aware of their monumental importance to Australia that they cannot be ignored but on the other hand they are no longer new enough to him to be items of great pride.

The format of the session was that he would speak for a short while and then we were free to ask him questions. In theory Whitlam was supposed to talk on the subject of "Australia in the Year 2000" but as it turned out he was more interested in talking about some questions which had been raised at a previous discussion, about the amalgamation of unions... and this and another subject kept him occupied for a full half hour. Following this various questions were asked, each of which led to a discourse which could last up to ten minutes. Each of these discourses took place as though the question had simply opened a tap within the Whitlam mind and from that small start came a whole network of ideas and arguments which neatly worked themselves into patterns as he spoke. This all happened so effortlessly that you would be forgiven for thinking that anybody could do something similar. And yet I know that in similar situations I would find it very difficult to speak with authority on even subjects in which I am expert, for that length of time and with that breadth of speaking skills.

To simply say that I was greatly impressed would be an understatement.

Since I'm getting towards the end of this page I'll indulge myself in a couple of comparisons between these two great men before I'm totally out of room.

I would find it difficult to say which of the two is the greater... I have been in the presence of so few such people that I have no experience and tend to become overawed.

Both are men of great intelligence, wit, speaking ability, understanding and so on. Both can call from their minds a vast array of intellectual and emotional discussions, arguments and questions. Both have physical presence (although Whitlam tends to display his socks).

The differences are that this evening Whitlam was not in his favourite element; he is a man who had become used to speaking in the company of powerful men, of using his skills to persuade these men to do as he believed right. This morning Manning Clark was in his element, doing the thing which he had spent a life perfecting.

Even so I prefer Manning Clark. He is an artist. But above that Manning Clark understands and displays the nobility of humility.