



A Grand History John Hirst on Mark McKenna's *An Eye for Eternity*

Mark McKenna's *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark* (Miegunyah Press, 816pp; \$54.99) is a challenging biography because it will not allow us to think that there is an easy way into the life of another person. In the second chapter, which by normal standards would deal with 'Boyhood and Youth' or 'Finding his Feet', McKenna discusses the source materials that exist for the life of the historian Manning Clark, author of the highly idiosyncratic *History of Australia* in six volumes (1962-87). There are abundant private sources, diaries and letters, which would seem to make the biographer's task easy, but McKenna asks why we think private writings reveal the 'real person' in ways that other evidence does not.

Clark's wife, Dymphna, was the first to doubt this in her husband's case. When he was travelling he would send her his usual maudlin letters; meanwhile, his companions would write to Dymphna, reporting that Clark was in excellent spirits. As to the diary, McKenna suggests Clark first used it to cast his life in the literary forms he aspired to use in his public writings, with Dostoevsky as the chief model; the literature then became the guide for the life he lived. Work out the 'real' and 'unreal' in that!

There is a particular problem in interpreting the Clark archive. Clark kept everything, expecting a biography would be written after his death and, in his sixties, he began to annotate the collection to assist and direct the biographer. As he read the archive, McKenna felt himself being manipulated by Clark's "wit, pathos and charm" but in truth he shows that on every page he has Clark's measure. The complex man has found a deft biographer.

How to read the sources - documents and memory - is McKenna's constant theme but he displays none of the smart-alec trickery of the crude postmodernist; he makes the going hard - but never hard to read - because he is a genuine enquirer who wants to guide us rather than aggrandise himself.

Some readers may not want to be taken down these paths (I was constantly enchanted), but in the first chapter they get closer to a live person than in most biographies. McKenna begins with Clark's voice: "soft, gravelly, vulnerable, a voice that seems always to be about to whisper the most intimate details in your ear, a voice that you must strain to hear yet cannot turn away from." McKenna never met Clark; this is the impression he derives from sound recordings. This

account is followed by reports of Clark's voice from those who knew him and, being a more scrupulous historian than his subject, McKenna carefully identifies all these witnesses. In similar vein we get the face, the clothes, the walk and the crowning symbol of the hat.

It is only in the third chapter that we meet the ancestors. How often are we asked in the first chapter of a biography to wade through bare details of names going back generations, for no better reason than that the information has been collected, with the reader being left to draw some inferences that the biographer has signally failed to do. Better to be told when the subject learnt of their ancestry and what they made of it. This is the approach McKenna takes and if we did not have Clark's autobiographical writings to inform us about how crucial his relations to his parents were, McKenna tells us of Clark taping letters to them on their gravestone.

Thereafter the book follows a broadly chronological path, written in mostly short chapters, where McKenna deals with one theme at a time. It is throughout a highly focused study. The acute observations on the uses Clark made of *Kristallnacht* - Clark placed himself in Bonn the day after the event, when he actually arrived two weeks later - come at the end of the biography.

To offset the uncertainties about Clark's life, there are regular moorings for it in the descriptions of where it was lived. We see Clark at home, in his study, around the dining room table, in his university office, in the lecture theatre (in the University of Melbourne's steeply raked theatre, he was not a lecturer at a podium but an actor on a stage) and at his beach house. McKenna's words are accompanied by abundant photographs, which also feature the relevant archival records.

The book is by no means a defence of Clark, either of the man or his work. Dymphna welcomed McKenna's visits to the family home after Clark died because he had not come "to worship at the feet of Saint Manning". McKenna makes it easy (if you are so inclined) to dislike Clark - as a self-pitying, highly manipulative poseur - and equally to understand why so many who knew him admired, loved, and drew strength and inspiration from him.

On one matter only does McKenna not step back very far from his subject: in his treatment of communism. He is rightly scathing about Clark's gullibility over the Soviet Union, at a time when Stalin's horrific slaughters were