Marcus Clarke Bohemian
by Michael Wilding


Marcus Clarke was one of those writers whose life was a succession of stories in itself. He was born in the London borough of Kensington on 24 April 1846 at 6 p.m. He was an only child and his mother Amelia died of tuberculosis just before his fourth birthday. In 1863, his father, a barrister with a good London practice in chancery, suddenly fell ill, lost the power of speech, and was put into an asylum at Stoke Newington, where he died on 1 December. Marcus wrote to his school friend Cyril Hopkins: ‘I remember, when my father was first taken ill, his telling me that I should be well provided for. He worked too hard and too long; which produced his final and fatal attack of paralysis … My cousins thought that he was worth at least seventy thousand pounds … Judge then of our consternation at finding affairs in the greatest confusion, the house in Ireland (left him by his elder brother) sold, and only a certain sum at his banker’s. Records of nothing! His cheque books showing large sums of money drawn out of his banking account with no trace of where they went to.”

Three months before his father died Marcus was packed off to Australia where his uncle James was a judge in Victoria. Earlier, his uncle Andrew had been Governor of Western Australia and his cousin Andrew the first Surveyor-General and Chief Commissioner of Crown Lands for Victoria, and Member of Parliament for Emerald Hill. Marcus was found a job in a

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bank. Hamilton Mackinnon, in the biographical introduction he wrote to two collections of Clarke’s writings, records Clarke’s farewell encounter with the manager:

Clarke: ‘I have come to ask, sir, whether you received my application for a few weeks’ leave of absence.’

The Manager: ‘I have, Mr Clarke.’

Clarke: ‘Will you grant it to me, sir?’

The Manager: ‘Certainly, Mr Clarke, and a longer leave, if you desire it.’

Clarke: ‘I feel very much obliged. How long may I extend it to, sir?’

The Manager: ‘Indefinitely, if you do not object!’

Clarke worked on the Swinton and Ledcourt sheep stations in the Wimmera district of Western Victoria for a couple of years from 1865 to 1867. Arthur Patchett Martin wrote of Clarke’s time there: ‘It is said that Mr Holt, the squatter, used to tell how he debauched the unsophisticated minds of his boundary-riders, by reading to them the too realistic pages of the great Balzac. He was in the habit of propounding theories as to the proprietorship of land resembling those of Mr Henry George, and which, it must be confessed, were not calculated to make those rude sons of toil contented with their lot.’

Returning to Melbourne, Clarke found work as a journalist with The Argus newspaper and its associated weekly, The Australasian. He did the usual things. He wrote a review of a concert performance that, unknown to him, the singer had cancelled through illness. He used the account of a horse race from his novel Long Odds as the basis for a report of the Melbourne Cup.

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allegedly by camera obscura, suitably changing the names. He remarked on the ‘instincts of monopoly of the parsimonious management of the Theatre Royal’ and warned about the production that ‘they have selected to mutilate’. The Theatre Royal sued for defamation and won a farthing’s damages on each of two counts, and Clarke, who had written and adapted a number of plays, got no further work in the theatre for the next five years.

Amidst it all he plunged into la vie Bohème. The Café de Paris of the Melbourne Theatre Royal was one of Clarke’s favourite hangouts. ‘Founded by a gentleman who had some difficulty in paying his bricklayers,’ Clarke wrote, it became the fashionable place for the Bohemians of the time. Theatre people, journalists, and others. Especially others. Clarke described his lifestyle at that time:

I was living then in Fig Tree Court with my friend Savage, and we dined at the Café daily. We were not rich, for we had both dissipated our incomes in the exact manner recorded of the Prodigal Son. I wrote for the Peacock, and Savage for the Screechowl. We made some four pounds sterling a week — and we were really thankful (not being grocers or drapers) to earn so much. The morning was spent in scribbling, the afternoon in tobacco, the evening in dinner, theatre, and gaslight. I fear we did not lead virtuous lives. I am sure that we were often out of bed after the small hours. I know that Madame Gogo and Lisette de Jambejolie assisted in the spending of the Peacock’s bounty. We were utterly useless beings, but then — well, we had good digestions and did not bother ourselves with high resolves and sentimental lovemaking. Now that Savage has written that work on the Pyramids, and my ‘Poems of the Affections’ have made so great a sensation, I feel that we ought to be much ashamed of the days when we were wicked, and natural, and happy.

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6 The Argus reported the case, 21-26 August 1874.
Charles Bright recalled meeting Clarke at the Café de Paris:

I noticed as a peculiarity of the newcomer that he partook of absinthe, a drink rarely called for by any but Frenchmen, and I asked if he liked it.

‘Not particularly,’ he said, ‘but I’m experimenting with it. They say it’ll drive a fellow mad in a month and I want to find out if that’s a fact. I’ve tried opium-smoking, and rather like that. There are a lot of lies told about these things, you know, and we have scriptural authority for proving all things and holding fast that which is good. I can’t say yet if absinthe be good, or not.’

Clarke was not averse to experimenting with drugs. He wrote a piece about hashish, ‘Cannabis Indica’, in the Colonial Monthly, February 1868. And he seems to have continued to use it. A Dr Cannabis appears in the Noah’s Ark column he contributed to The Australasian in 1872 and 1873.

With the right family connections, Clarke joined the establishment Melbourne Club in 1868. In the same year he joined the newly established Athenaeum Club, and helped establish the more Bohemian and literary Yorick Club.

The Yorick Club had its origins in the Saturday night gatherings arranged by Frederick Haddon, the editor of The Argus, at his lodgings in Spring Street. When he moved into rooms in Collins Street there was no suitable large room for the Saturday night meetings.

Haddon and Clarke were the moving spirits behind the formation of the Yorick Club in May 1868. It provided a meeting ground for fellow writers and journalists such as Adam Lindsay

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10 See The Australasian, 12 July 1873, in Hergenhan, A Colonial City, 275–81.

Initially the group moved to Nissen’s Café in Bourke Street, but the regulars there objected to the noise they made, so a room was rented for £1 a week in the \textit{Punch} office, 74 Collins Street. The \textit{Argus} office was next door. Mueller’s tavern was below. ‘In its early days Mueller catered for the club until two o’clock in the morning, after which it stayed open until four or five o’clock for members who were newspaper printers.’\textsuperscript{12}

The first official meeting of the club was held 1 May 1868. Dr Patrick Moloney, a friend of Clarke’s and at this time an intern at Melbourne Hospital, gave Clarke a skull which Clarke brought to the club room and placed on the mantel-shelf with a pipe under its jaw. Clarke suggested the club should be called the ‘Golgotha’ because it was ‘the place of skulls’. According to the 1911 history, \textit{The Yorick Club}, he ‘hammered away at the idea all night’ but the club ended up being called the Yorick — an allusion not only to \textit{Hamlet} but to Laurence Sterne’s \textit{Tristram Shandy}. Nonetheless when Clarke and Kendall came to write about it, they called it the Golgotha.

In the end Clarke got very huffy, took his skull and disappeared, not returning for some days. He gave the skull to the actor Walter Montgomery, who was playing Hamlet at the Theatre Royal, and used it in the famous ‘Alas, poor Yorick’ soliloquy.

Clarke himself wrote about the club in his ‘Peripatetic Philosopher’ column in \textit{The Australasian}, 2 May 1868.


Everybody wants to know the secrets of the prison-house, and as Timmins, one of our number, incautiously told his wife that we keep a skull on the mantelshelf, there is much suspicion and terror around. I may briefly mention, however, that the story of the newspaper lad being scraped to death with oyster shells at a late supper, and buried in the back kitchen, is not absolutely true in all its details.\(^\text{13}\)

It is a wonder that he could mention anything, since the first official meeting had occurred only the previous day; and the article would have had to have been written two days before that in order to meet *The Australasian’s* deadline.

Henry Kendall, who moved to Melbourne from Sydney the following year, described his first visit to the club:

Facing the landing, an old door opened into an aromatic room, which, I was informed, did duty as ‘the reading, talking, and smoking-den’. The most remarkable items of its furniture were the spittoons — useful utensils in their way, no doubt, but distressingly plentiful and palpable at the Golgotha. Passing through a suggestive lavatory, we entered the library, where I found a stock-in-trade, consisting of a couple of desks, four or five chairs, a table, two shelves bristling with ancient magazines and effete blue-books, certain other sundries of a doubtful character, and a melancholy waiter. An apartment, called by courtesy the dining-room, and devoted principally to a brace of dissipated newspaper reporters, was the only other feature that arrested a somewhat disappointed stranger’s attention.\(^\text{14}\)

Clarke provided an account of what the Yorick Club members did not do. But what exactly did they do? Haddon’s Saturday evenings used to offer a mixed bill of stories, songs and

\(^{13}\) ‘A Quiet Club’, *Australasian*, 9 May 1868, 593; reprinted in *The Peripatetic Philosopher* by ‘Q’, George Robertson, Melbourne, 1869, 48.

excellent brandy. The Yorick Club seems to have added a certain vociferousness to these occasions. The journalist and novelist, G. A. Walstab, was an early exponent of face-painting. He specialized in taking coals from the fire in the early morning, and blackening the faces of the members dozing in their chairs or beneath the tables. The official history, *The Yorick Club: Its Origin and Development*, records that Adam Lindsay Gordon at times was wildly jovial, and one evening pitched Clarke up to very near the ceiling and caught him again coming down. There was nowhere to sit in comfort at first, anyway. At one stage they sat on bales of newspapers, at another on kerosene drums. Clarke denied that they drank the kerosene: ‘I may, without breaking faith, refute the accusation made by a friend, that the members sit on tubs round the room, smoke green tea, and drink neat kerosene out of pewter pots. More I cannot reveal.’ Though they certainly had pewter pots. ‘Not empty, gentle reader,’ records one member. One unsubstantiated theory is that they passed round a skull with some opium-based mixture. And the green tea Clarke refers to might have been hyonskin tea, popular in the outback and reputed to drive you mad according to some doctors; or it might have been marijuana, sometimes colloquially referred to as tea. It was about this time that Clarke persuaded a Collins Street doctor to get him some hashish. The doctor agreed to on condition that he could watch and make notes while Clarke took it. He wouldn’t let Clarke see the notes and, the doctor records, Clarke ‘became sarcastic in his remarks’. After three and a half hours Clarke began to dictate a story.

*The Yorick Club: Its Origin and Development* recalls: ‘Adam Lindsay Gordon was as much a ringleader as anybody else. When he played, he played hard.’ Clarke, it remarks ‘was always ready for mischief night and day.’ The journalist Alfred Telo, Clarke’s former flatmate, is described as ‘one of the most outrageous of the practical jokers’. He brought back from the Pacific islands a collection of long spears and one night these were used in a piece of Dadaist street theatre to lift from their hooks the gilded hats hung out as signs by Melbourne hatters.

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17 Hamilton Mackinnon, *Austral Edition*, vi, slightly revised from the *Memorial Volume*.

Another favourite game was collecting brass doorknobs. Telo particularly prized one he had stolen from the theatre critic James Neild. Neild wrote a letter to *The Argus* denouncing the ‘idiots who could find nothing better to do than to wrench off citizens’ knockers’ — ‘only to find, on the following morning, that his house had been visited afresh and ornamented with a fishing rod and a gilt fish, a pawnbroker’s sign, and an undertaker’s board.’

There was also a fair bit of horse riding. Frank Maldon Robb, who was a Melbourne barrister, records an anecdote by the Melbourne solicitor James Moloney, brother of Clarke’s friend Dr Patrick Moloney, about an afternoon spent with Clarke, the actor Walter Montgomery and Adam Lindsay Gordon when they rode across what was then Elwood Swamp:

> It remains for Mr Moloney an unforgettable day by virtue of two facts: first, the romantic rhetoric which poured unceasingly from the lips of Marcus Clarke on all subjects in heaven and earth and the waters under the earth, broken at frequent intervals by the declamations of Montgomery of relevant or irrelevant passages from Shakespeare; and secondly, by the contribution of Gordon to the wild symposium. Mounted on a little pony, his legs almost touching the ground, Gordon raced it at every obstacle that could be construed into a jump, and then darted back to the other three, firing off long quotations from his favourite Latin authors, the jaunt thus begun not ending till the ‘wee sma’ ’oors’ in the poet’s house at Brighton.”

But another jaunt with Montgomery in June 1868 ended in disaster when Clarke fell from his horse, fractured his skull and was unconscious for three weeks. The ‘Peripatetic Philosopher’ column did not appear for five weeks and Clarke’s friend G. A. Walstab supplied two episodes of Clarke’s novel *Long Odds* which was being serialized in the *Colonial Monthly*.

Clarke always had an interest in the theatre. A short burlesque that he wrote, *The Lady of the Lake*, was given theatrical performance in 1864 and his first full-length play, adapted from Charles Reade’s novel *Foul Play*, was performed in 1868, followed by *Peacock’s Feathers*

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adapted from Molière’s *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and *Plot*, dramatized from Alexandre Dumas’ novel *Le Vicomte de Bragelonne*.21

22 July 1869 Clarke married Marian Dunn, the youngest daughter of the Irish comedian and actor John Dunn. He had typically failed to look for lodgings for them both until the marriage ceremony had actually been concluded. She had been a popular actress before her marriage. Eleven years later she was back on the stage again to help out with the family cash crises, Clarke writing *A Daughter of Eve* and adapting a French comedy *Forbidden Fruit, or the Custom of Caudubec* with parts especially for her.22

In 1870, the year after his marriage, Clarke took a salaried job as Secretary to the Trustees of the Melbourne Public Library.23 He wore his duties lightly. The moving spirit behind the establishment of the library and the chairman of its board of trustees was Sir Redmond Barry. Hamilton Mackinnon remarks on ‘the interest Sir Redmond Barry evinced in the rising littérateur, whom he took under his parental wing, when obtaining for him the secretaryship of the Public Library’ and records one characteristic vignette:

> It was a hot summer’s day, and, as was his style in such weather, the librarian was dressed dandily in unspotted white flannel, with a genuine cabbage-tree hat stuck defiantly on the back of his head; and so clothed he was leisurely wending his way up the steps of the library when he met the President, looking more starched, if possible, than ever, and

21 Clarke added these three plays of his to the ongoing bibliography, ‘The Australian Drama’, in a note to the English antiquarian journal, *Notes and Queries*, 5 ser., 3, 20 February 1875, 158.
wearing the well-known, flat-rimmed, tapering bell-topper, which shone in the glare of the noonday sun: and the following brief dialogue ensued.

President: ‘Good morning, Mr Clarke.’
Librarian: ‘Good morning, sir.’
President: ‘I scarcely think your hat, however cool it may be, is exactly suited to the position you occupy in connection with this establishment, Mr Clarke — Good morning, Mr Clarke.’

And with a stiff bend of the erect body the President took his departure with just a glimmer of a smile playing round the firmly closed haughty lips. 24

Clarke was fond of his cabbage-tree hat. It had been made for him by a convict in Pentridge Prison. In 1902 his third son, Rowley, took it with him when he sailed to South Africa with the 2nd Commonwealth contingent. It is preserved in the picture collection of the State Library of Victoria. 25

Hugh McCrae recalled his father George Gordon McCrae’s friendship with Clarke:

George, who admired him, often pointed out a green metal lion half-way up the steps leading to the Melbourne Public Library. It was into the mouth of this lion that Marcus used to commit his unfinished cigar, before being manacled to the desk at his office. The lion, smoking the cigar, became a signal to his friends that Marcus was within.

Clarke coveted his freedom so much that he would rather scintillate outside than be earning his salary as sub-librarian locked up among books. Actually, in his own words, he preferred to ‘trinquer’ at the ‘House-of-the-Light-Wine-of-the-Country’ before his humdrum devoirs at the Bibliotheque …

24 Mackinnon, Memorial Volume, 43; slightly revised in Austral Edition, xi. The relationship between Clarke and Barry is the subject of a play by Sue Gore and Bill Garner, The Future Australian Race: Redmond Barry versus Marcus Clarke, (2008), text in Fryer Library, University of Queensland, item H2554.

Marcus could never be found when he was wanted. Sir Ferdinand Jakob Heinrich von Mueller once said he might go to the Botanic Gardens and be certain of seeing there an example of the native fuchsia tied to a stake from Monday to Monday — but Clarke was no native fuchsia; and that he carried his household with him wherever he went. At the beginning of the week, he might be in Coburg; and the middle of it in Essendon; and, at the end of it, in Brighton — or Moonee Ponds.26

‘I have sold my birthright of free speech for a mess of official pottage, and so to all intents and purposes my “Peripatetic” is dead …’ Clarke wrote in The Australasian, 11 June 1870, announcing the end of the ‘Peripatetic Philosopher’ column. A public service position was deemed to preclude him from journalism that involved anything that might seem like political comment. Nonetheless, he continued to write and publish no less prolifically, not only the serial of His Natural Life, but also the historical ‘Old Tales Retold’ that became Old Tales of a Young Country, together with stories, poems and articles, as well as the occasional theatrical venture. And the official pottage meant that his income was double the amount he had earned simply from writing. But it still wasn’t enough.

His Natural Life may have brought Clarke fame, but it didn’t bring fortune. In 1874, the year it was published in book form, he was declared bankrupt. His debts amounted to £2,186. 6s. 6d; his assets to £505. A catalogue was printed for the sale of his books, The Well-Selected Library of Mr Marcus Clarke.27 He began a new column, ‘The Wicked World’ for the Melbourne Daily Telegraph’s weekend magazine, the Weekly Times. It shows Clarke at his most Balzacian, portraying the moneyed world of Melbourne in all its pretensions and dishonesties.

He had been hoping to be appointed the new Melbourne Librarian, but in November 1879 he wrote an essay for the Victorian Review on the irrelevancy of Christianity in the modern age.28 The Bishop of Melbourne, Dr James Moorhouse, replied. Clarke responded with a second

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26 Hugh McCrae, My Father and My Father’s Friends, Angus & Robertson, Sydney, 1935, 47.
28 ‘Civilization without Delusion’, Victorian Review, 1, 1, November 1879, 65–75; reprinted in Marcus Clarke, ed. Wilding, 672–83. See Joan E. Poole, ‘Marcus Clarke: “Christianity is
article exposing weaknesses in the bishop’s arguments which the *Victorian Review* refused to publish. The *Melbourne Review* accepted it, only to withdraw all copies from sale upon publication. The whole debate was collected in book form as *Civilisation Without Delusion* (1880) and sold rapidly.29

It made Clarke no friends with the Melbourne establishment, and didn’t help his chances of being appointed Librarian. Mackinnon records the reaction of the President of the Trustees of the Public Library, Sir Redmond Barry:

The President appeared one evening in the librarian’s office with a somewhat clouded countenance, and said, ‘Good evening, Mr Clarke.’ The librarian with an intuitive feeling that a lecture was about to be administered, returned the salutation, when the President remarked: ‘Mr Clarke; you would oblige me greatly if you were to leave some things undone. For instance, that unfortunate article of yours — attacking so estimable a man as the bishop. Very indiscreet, Mr Clarke. I — think — I — should require — to — have — some — thousands a year of a private income before I would — venture — upon writing such an — article on — such a subject, and among so punctilious a community as exists here. Good evening, Mr Clarke.’30

Then Clarke helped adapt Gilbert A’Beckett’s burlesque *The Happy Land*, based on the play *The Wicked World* by W. S. Gilbert (under the pseudonym F. Tomline). It dealt with the visit of three politicians to Fairyland, where the benefits of popular government are explained to them. Clarke helped to adapt it from English to Australian conditions. The Victorian government immediately banned it and *The Argus* and *The Age* just as promptly printed the text.31 Clarke’s

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name was not specifically mentioned, but it was widely known that he had been involved in the adaptation. Clarke may have been surprised when he was not appointed Librarian. No one else was.

But he had little time to be surprised. He had borrowed money on the strength of being appointed. The money-lender, Aaron Waxman, pressed for payment. Clarke declared bankruptcy for a second time, and so was required to resign his library position. He became sick with pleurisy ‘and this developing into congestion of the liver, and finally into erysipelas, carried him off in the space of one short week,’ Mackinnon records; ‘the end came upon him rapidly. Losing his speech he beckoned for pencil and paper, and seizing hold of the sheets moved his hand over them as if writing. Shortly afterwards the mind began to wander, but still the hand continued moving with increasing velocity, and every now and then a futile attempt to speak was made.’

He died at St Kilda at 4 p.m. on 2 August 1881. He was thirty-five, and left a wife and six children, the eldest only eleven.

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Marcus Clarke. Quite the same Wikipedia. Just better. Clarke was an important literary figure in Australia, and was the centre of an important bohemian circle. Among the writers were in contact with him were Victor Daley and George Gordon McCrae. The biography "Cyril Hopkins' Marcus Clarke" is the only first-hand account of Clarke's early life in London. It draws on first-hand experiences of both author and subject.[7]. Marcus Clarke considered himself a Bohemian, he became secretary to the trustees of the Melbourne Athenaeum in 1872 and became sub assistant librarian in 1868. It is documented that Marcus wrote other pieces of work, like other novels, comedies and pantomimes. In 1868 he married Marian Dunn (an actress) and fathered 6 children. It is reported that he was often in financial difficulties, he died at the young age of 35 on 2 August 1881. Marcus Clarke Bohemian by Michael Wilding. Save to Library. Download. Gerard Manley Hopkins, his brother Cyril, and Marcus Clarke were schoolfellows at Highgate School in the 1850s-60s. Save to Library. Download. About marcus clarke. Artistic Statement: From Fine Art to Professional Puppetry and back again. It started as a visual exploration of apophenia, pareidolia and loss in non psychotic style using a skilled craftsman Read More. Education. Mansfield College of Art. Warwick Uni.