

Australians in Aspic: Picturing Charmian Clift and George Johnston's Hydra Expatriation

TANYA DALZIELL
University of Western Australia

PAUL GENONI
Curtin University

When George Johnston was speaking to Stuart Sayers, the literary editor of *The Age* newspaper, on the eve of the release of *Clean Straw for Nothing* (1969), he was keen to highlight the novel's specific representation of expatriation. Johnston stressed that his was not 'that banal expatriation which Barry Humphries pictures in the Aussies of Kangaroo Valley in London's Earl's [sic] Court.' Instead, his novel depicts nothing less than an existential expatriation, 'a highly subtle and complex dissolution of the human soul,' whose reach and implication was global. 'Expatriation is a world problem,' Johnston is reported to have said, 'Europe, for example, is infested with hundreds of thousands of self-imposed exiles wandering around looking for different things in different ways.' If expatriation is a 'problem,' if Europe is 'infested' with aimless wanderers, then it also implicitly upholds Johnston's decision to repatriate from the Greek island of Hydra and to write 'of the thing I know most about: that is, being an Australian.' *Clean Straw for Nothing* has since assumed a place as a classic account of the Australian experience of literary expatriation, recounting as it does the relationship between David Meredith and Cressida Morley, the alter-egos of Johnston and his wife Charmian Clift, and fictionalising their movement over nearly two decades from Sydney, to London, to the Aegean island of Hydra, and back to Sydney.

Theories of literary expatriation have evolved in the years since *Clean Straw for Nothing* was published, as Australian literature has been increasingly seen to function within the context of increasingly globalised spheres of production and consumption (Dixon). Although Australian expatriation has been a phenomenon that transcends occupational categories, it has been the expatriation of writers (and other creative 'types') over an extended period that has attracted the most attention from scholars (Alomes; Bennett and Pender; Britain; Hergenhan and Petersson; Morton). As Bruce Bennett and Anne Pender note, 'the expatriation of Australian writers from the nineteenth to the twenty-first century [is] an important cultural phenomenon' (1), and one that continues to call out for understanding in terms of its complex (and shifting) drivers; its impact on the literary production of those who have expatriated; and the capacity of literary expatriation to help dissolve national literatures within post-national or globalised spheres of production and consumption.

An important element of Clift and Johnston's expatriation that led them eventually to the Aegean islands of firstly Kalymnos, and then Hydra, was their decision to reject the familiar and comparatively 'easy' pathway offered by the major international centres of cultural production. As a result the assumptions found in previous studies of Australian literary expatriation during the post-World War II generation do not necessarily hold true in their case (Britain; Conrad). These studies have approached the subject from a post-colonial perspective with a focus on the periphery and the centre; cosmopolitanism and (more recently) globalisation. According to this analysis, literary expatriation is explained by the desire to associate with the established centres of cultural production, in particular London, with its

strong attraction as both an imperial capital and an established centre for literary excellence and global publishing. As a result, studies of literary expatriation have focused most often on the United Kingdom (Alomes; Morton; Bennett and Pender), although, as Peter Conrad argued in his 2004 Boyer Lectures, more recently there has been a shift in the focus of expatriation with the emergence of other global capitals, in particular New York, which have joined and even replaced London as preferred destinations for the ambitious literary expatriate. This means, however, little change at all, insofar as the Anglophone cosmopolitan centre remains the destination of choice.

These previous studies also raise the question as to why literary expatriates are a favoured subject for investigation. Part of the reason is surely because of the typically rich textual record they leave of their experience. While this is often fiction, as in the case of *Clean Straw for Nothing*, their reflections on their expatriation might also be found in poetry, memoir, diaries, correspondence and interviews. It is notable that when Laurie Hergenhan and Irmtraud Petersson edited a collection of personal accounts of literary expatriation they commenced with the experience of Johnston and Clift and their family on Hydra, and brought together text derived from an interview with Clift; a segment from Clift's *Peel Me a Lotus* (1959), her memoir of the family's first year on Hydra; a section from *Clean Straw for Nothing*; and a poem by their eldest son, Martin Johnston. There are, however, other forms of 'evidence' relating to the experience of expatriation that might be capable of complementing or contesting the text-based accounts. One of these is photography, and it is possible that investigating a body of photographs, in their capacity as 'an unexamined part of modern perception itself' as John Berger observed (49), might potentially yield new understanding of the experience of expatriation.

This article is therefore interested in Johnston and Clift, and how their expatriation, alongside others who formed a recognisable community of writers and artists on Hydra for nearly a decade (1955–1964), has been represented photographically. In addition to the two Australians, the expat colony during this period included Canadian poet, novelist and songwriter Leonard Cohen and his partner Marianne Ihlen; Scandinavian novelists Axel Jensen, Goran Tunström and Tore Pedersen; Greek-American artist Demetri Gassoumis and his wife Carolyn; American queer novelist Gordon Merrick and his partner Charles Hulse; English designer David Goschen and his wife Angela; English painter Anthony Kingsmill, Canadian writer Roger Maybank; American artist Fidel Caliesch; New Zealand novelist and journalist Redmond 'Bim' Wallis and his wife Robyn; English journalist and *Private Eye* founder Christopher Booker, and at least for a short time, American photographer and orientalist James Burke.

While *Clean Straw for Nothing* and *Peel Me a Lotus* have been used to document the couple's experience on Hydra, this account puts the latter work in particular in the context of the nearly 1,600 black and white photographs taken on the island in 1960 by James Burke, a *Life* magazine staff photographer. Burke was born in Shanghai and spent much of his working life travelling central Asia on assignment, and he and Johnston first met in Tibet in 1944 when they were working as war correspondents (Genoni and Dalziell). The two remained in touch after the war, and following Burke's premature death in 1964 Clift recalled fondly that, 'He used to wear thick bifocals and a baseball cap and hideous flowered shirts, and he was a brave and simple and good man and one of the finest photographers in the world' (*World* 54).

While photographs of the expatriate artists on Hydra, drawn from private albums and public archives, have been sprinkled throughout biographies and memoirs over several decades,

Burke's previously unpublished photographs surfaced on the internet only after Google joined forces with the *Time-Life* archive in 2008 to digitise and make accessible millions of analogue photographs, prints and negatives. Their appearance has attracted attention on Facebook pages, websites and blogs devoted to Australian literature, Hydra and its artist-community, and its most renowned member, Leonard Cohen. The release of Burke's photographs provides an opportunity to revisit Johnston's and Clift's years on Hydra, and to reflect on Johnston's comments about expatriation and 'being an Australian' in the world.

Burke had a keen photographic eye for this 'colony,' and his timing in visiting Hydra can be seen in retrospect to have been ideal. The island's expatriate artist-community had its heyday during a pause in an extended period of political and civil unrest in Greece—it formed following the cessation of civil war in 1949, and largely fell apart (in its original incarnation) prior to the ascension of the military junta in 1967. Although individual photos cannot be dated accurately, the extrinsic evidence indicates they were taken during September and October in 1960. This summer of 1960 might be seen as both as a highpoint and a tipping-point for the Hydra expatriates. On the one hand most of the key players were present, and although both professional and personal competitiveness ensured that the relationships between them were never completely harmonious, they were less fractious than they would become leading up to Johnston's and Clift's departures in 1964. Burke's images, striking for their documentary realism, depict many of the artists, their friends, partners and patrons, at work, in their homes, being tourists, and socialising and at leisure with each other and the local Hydriots, in what can be read as a representation of an idealised international community pursuing their art while enjoying a form of 'authentic' island living. On the other hand, Burke's photographs also capture the beginnings of the changes to Hydra wrought by post-war modernities that would eventually transform island-life and undermine its appeal to those engaged in this modest experience of an early-sixties counter-culture. The changing face of Hydra that worried Johnston and Clift and other expatriates included the advent of mass tourism; the arrival of the yachts of the leisured wealthy; and the increasing commercialisation of the legendarily beautiful Hydra waterfront. Even the number of military personnel appearing on the photographic fringe might be seen as a portent of the coming junta that so distressed Johnston and Clift at a time when they were safely back in Australia.

Taken as 'evidence,' Burke's photographs reveal for the first time the presence of several of these expatriates on Hydra who commentators and biographers have not previously documented. There are, however, limitations to approaching Burke's photographs simply as 'proof,' something the representational quality of photography encourages. As Celia Lury, in common with other theorists of photography, has pointed out, 'the photograph, more than merely representing, has taught us a way of seeing' (3). A number of photographs of Johnston and Clift strolling side-by-side down the cobbled alleys of Hydra are a case in point.



Figure 1. Charmian Clift and George Johnston, Hydra, 1960.
(James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

This photograph looks familiar. Observers who know the many stories and images circulating around Clift and Johnston would identify with reasonable certainty that it features the two Australian authors on Hydra. Yet, it is also familiar because arguably it looks like so many other travel photographs—a picturesque setting; travellers setting out for an ‘authentic’ local experience as evidenced by the wicker shopping basket; and the image carefully framed to include the donkey (to this day, donkeys remain the island’s only transport). The photograph offers evidence of the presence of Clift and Johnston, but what does it really convey of their expatriate lives? If anything, the image carries evidence of the camera, and suggests another ‘presence’—of an audience attuned to the representation of Mediterranean island travel as pictographic and exotic. According to such expectations this is exactly what expatriation should look like: a casual stroll to the markets through the narrow, cobble streets and past the local donkey. A photograph such as this one is perhaps not so much about the lives of

Clift and Johnston on Hydra as it represents how travel is to be apprehended and determined photographically, and in doing so it speaks implicitly to the middle-class taste-formation that was the cornerstone of *Life* magazine's appeal.

This intimate if subtle relation between Burke's photographs and capitalism is emphasised by this image now being one of millions in the 'bank' overseen by Getty Images, which trades in a 'post-photographic era' (Mitchell) marked by the malleability, and very profitable marketability, of pixels. Yet, this contemporary circumstance, coupled with the recognition that '*photographic truth*' is a 'myth' (Sturken and Cartwright, 17), does not altogether sever the association Burke's photographs might have with those expatriate lives on Hydra. What Burke's photographs 'mean' is far from self-evident, but they can be approached to open out beyond the empirical moment of their taking, not to expose some suppressed truth intrinsic to the images, but to recognise that photographs are always reconstructed discursively. As Victor Burgin argues, on the premise that photographs do not have any secure reference:

The intelligibility of the photograph is no simple thing; photographs are *texts* inscribed in terms of what we might call 'photographic discourse', but this discourse, like any other, engages discourse beyond itself, the 'photographic text', like any other, is the site of complex 'intertextuality', an overlapping series of previous texts 'taken for granted' at a particular cultural and historical conjuncture. (144)

At the same time that Burke's photographs remind us that they are a way of seeing, they also demand a dialogic interaction with other texts that highlight the role of viewers and contexts in making and shifting meaning, a circumstance that is foregrounded when these images are retrospectively placed alongside other accounts of expatriation on Hydra.



Figure 2. Charmian Clift shopping on the *agora*, Hydra.
(James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

For example, in *Peel Me a Lotus*, Clift herself was not above romanticising the couple's island existence or abiding by the clichéd accounts of their harbour-side market-place. She was, however, also too much of a realist to fail to express the very apparent shortcomings of an island existence that remained dislocated from the convenience of the major cities that the couple had left behind. In doing so she points out one of the limitations of a photograph—the inability to foreground what isn't in an image.

Such melons and peaches and apricots, such peppers and little green squashes and purple aubergines and tomatoes the size of your two fists. Why, one can live on next to nothing, and live well too. Then what imp of perversity is it that makes me long for asparagus, for mushrooms, for tender-loin steaks, and chateau-bottle claret? (*Peel* 126)

At the time it was taken, Clift's and Johnston's decisions to move first from Sydney and then London to live on an island remote from the literary infrastructure of agents, editors, publishers, reviewers and readers, was well outside the norm of Australian literary expatriation, and underpinned by their determination to fulfil their vision of a committed artistic existence. It was on Hydra, where living was cheap and the sunshine plentiful, that they imagined themselves writing serious novels that would bring them critical and financial success. Hydra, or at least one version of it, was positively construed to be outside modernity and hence conducive to the kind of authenticity that framed the couple's expatriation. In an early passage in *Peel Me a Lotus* Clift explicitly links the pre-modern appearance of Hydra town with its physical attractiveness and spectacular island setting, to disclose a place ready for certain types of expatriate occupation.

In appearance, the town today must be almost exactly what it was in the days of the merchant princes, for practically no houses have been built in the last one hundred and twenty years. It rises in tiers around a small, brilliant, horseshoe-shaped harbour—old stone mansions harmoniously apricot-coloured against the gold and bronze cliffs, or washed pure white and shuttered in palest grey: houses austere but exquisitely proportioned, whose great walls and heavy arched doors enclose tiled courtyards and terraced gardens. The irregular tiers are broken everywhere by steep, crooked flights of stone steps, and above the tilted rooftops of uniform red tiles rise the octagonal domes of the churches . . . Above the town the mountains shoot up sheer, their gaunt surfaces unbroken except for an odd white mill or two . . . and three monasteries, the highest of them so close to heaven that at night its lights are looped among the stars. (25–26)

De-populated and deific in this description of it, Clift depicts Hydra vertically: its features are tiers, steps, mountains and monasteries that reach towards the stars, and the island is oriented upwards rather than outwards to somewhere that might be called the rest of the world. In contrast to these views turned outward, to history, at this moment Clift presents a familiar (metaphorical) idea of 'an island' as a self-contained space withdrawn from the maelstrom of the mainstream, which romantically sidesteps the island's necessary connectedness to elsewhere. In part because of the island's physical features—it has no roads, it is rocky and barren and unsuited to agriculture—the incoming transportation of goods and foodstuffs was, and is, absolutely essential. Yet, Hydra is rendered as a place-holder in Clift's narrative for an idea(l) of artistic expatriation, a kind of 'escape' that also affords a clarity of vision. These states are achieved, and achievable, because the town and island are also denied coeval status

with the modern world, a classic colonialist encoding that sets up the island as a place differentiated and ripe for artistic (under)takings.

This is a time when I almost have to pinch myself to believe in my own existence . . . floating just above the cobbles through a myriad small radiant explosions of sunlight and an intoxicating geometry of café tables, ship's prows, doors, windows, houses, roof-tops, rigging, that sing their coloured scraps of arcs and cubes and angles so piercingly as to almost burst my heart. As though it is me who has just been born. (64)

Peel Me a Lotus is rife with similar imagery of new birth (the opening chapters recount the birth of the couple's third child), that in turn produce a narrative of settlement and a search for permanence. The book begins with a declaration of proprietorial possession—'Today we bought the house by the well' (9)—and is obsessively interested in the narrator and her family making themselves a(t) home. But as a colonial or expatriate narrative, *Peel Me a Lotus* is notable in that it offers little acknowledgment of what or where has preceded the purchase of the house by the well. It is a story of the existential stress of expatriation without a back-story, and with very little hint of any lingering national identification—Australia is afforded the briefest of mentions. The success of settlement is found at the point where Clift can rue, without irony it would seem, that Hydra is 'to suffer the fate of so many beautiful little Mediterranean ports 'discovered' by the creative poor . . . We are watching the island in the process of becoming *chic*' (148). The narrator here positions herself as a local and with little concession given to her own participation, her own expatriation, in the unwelcome process she witnesses.

The town of Hydra was also a subject of interest to Burke, with nearly seventy photographs featuring it at a distance, from various vantage points, including a boat and from atop the surrounding mountains. Indeed, in a neat counterpoint to Clift's vertiginous 'upward' description in *Peel Me a Lotus* quoted above, Burke took many photographs from the vantage point of 'heaven,' looking down the hills towards the town, its port and beyond, taking in a wide sweep of the Gulf of Hydra (*Kolpos Idras*) and Peloponnese.



Figure 3. Hydra town. (James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

In taking this photograph Burke's eye was likely caught by the boat—almost certainly the daily Athens ferry—seen making its way through the harbour mouth. At a time when the island had little electricity and no telephones, this ferry was the island's most vital connection to the wider world. Delivering tourists, travellers and mail, it was a commercial necessity for the Hydriots and a social one for the expatriates. The image is also a reminder that although the precipitous nature of the island's geography contributed to both its economic challenges and its picturesque appeal, most life and activity on Hydra was confined to the flattest of stages—the expansive promenade, the *agora* that enjoined the harbour, the dock and the town's waterfront commercial strip.

It is therefore certainly by design that Burke took numerous pictures of the Hydra port and the ferry, which gesture towards Hydra's emerging part as a participant in a wider world of European post-war recovery. Newfound political stability, gathering affluence and ongoing modernisation of transport and travel were ensuring that Hydra's renown and allure extended beyond its own shores and beyond the Aegean, as it became increasingly attractive for a generation from Europe and beyond who were looking for some escape or meaning as the Cold War gathered momentum.



Figure 4. George Johnston, Martin Johnston, Charmian Clift (left of picture), Hydra port.
(James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

In this photograph Johnston, Clift, and Martin Johnston are pictured on the dockside waiting, for who knows whom, or what. It was a frequent experience for the couple, Clift recording how, 'For the fifth day in succession we waited behind the pickets on the waterfront [for the] small, white graceful ship' (*Peel* 56). There are several ways to read the image, but what is compositionally striking when set alongside Clift's vertical account of the town and island, is its horizontal stretch. The diagonal lines formed by the boat and the railing draw our eye from the figures in the foreground, through the throng of disembarking passengers, towards the distance. Because of its documentary claims, the photograph renders arriving, departing and

waiting as common and interdependent experiences in the moment captured. The photograph also inevitably invokes some consideration of that which lies beyond the immediate moment and place of its taking, gesturing towards Hydra's role as a major trading port during the 18th and early 19th centuries; and that mass tourism to the island, and its attendant form of representation—the photograph—were in their ascendancy by the 1960s. It is certainly not incidental that a number of Burke's photographs on the dock feature tourists bearing cameras and taking photographs, and rubbing up against the traditional cargo-based activities of the dockside.



Figure 5. George Johnston strides the *agora*. (James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

One example is this photograph, in which Johnston is both amongst and yet apart from the activity of the *agora*. At first glance, caught in the central middle-distance, he is just one more presence amongst the dockside crowd that moves in both directions along the busy walkway that separates the harbour from the shops, taverns and restaurants that service both locals and visitors. It is a scene that depicts tourists, with cameras slung across shoulders and hung around necks, and Hydriots, going about their daily business, equally enjoying the summer sunshine. The image is again composed in such a way as to (literally) foreground the presence of a donkey and the adjacent wine barrels—another exploitation of the town's picturesque appeal but also a legitimate means of compositionally juxtaposing the traditional aspects of Hydra's commerce with its emerging role as a provider of leisure and recreation for those who, in Clift's phrase, 'dreamed of islands' (Peel 70).

At first glance the broad rump of the donkey might seemingly reject the camera, as indeed does the static bulk of the barrel, but they are made into a seamless, essential component of the composition. By contrast, the space immediately beyond on the crowded dockside is opened up, and attracts the eye in a way that allows the viewer access to the busyness of the *agora*, while also focusing on the central point of the image, occupied by the figure of George Johnston. Johnston is immediately conspicuous in that he is both half-a-head taller than those

who surround him and compositionally isolated in the otherwise overlapping crowd of figures. And whereas most others are depicted as relaxed and wandering as one would expect on the bucolic harbour side, Johnston apparently has purpose and direction, cutting a swathe through the crowd of strollers. It is not too fanciful to suggest that this apparently incidental shot depicts Johnston not only in full stride but also full pose, representing himself to the camera as a man of purpose, channeling his desire and ambition for his as yet unwritten great Australian novel. Whereas to casual viewers Johnston might go entirely unrecognised or unnoticed, to others it presents a striking rendering of the expatriate author caught in a pose and attitude that separates him from both tourists and locals—that is, as the great expatriate Australian writer he aspired to be. Certainly the photograph is not a ‘one off’—Burke took similar photographs of Johnston striding the dockside—as if photographer and subject were working in unison to represent something essential about Johnston’s expatriate experience.

In that context, Burke’s decision to take numerous photographs of Johnston within his own home, and the permission he must have received to take such intimate shots, underscores the close relationship between the two men, while also highlighting Johnston’s complicity in the photographic process. What is immediately apparent about these domestic images of Johnston is how differently he is projected from those taken in social situations outside the house. The summer of 1960 was a difficult one for Johnston and Clift financially and they were struggling to keep both their own relationship and their expatriate dream alive. Johnston was also increasingly aware that he was failing to deliver on his ‘promise’ to produce high quality fiction, as he balanced his writing between unsatisfactory novels under his own name and genre-bound crime fiction using the pseudonym Shane Martin. In several series of portraits Johnston is depicted at home as being apparently alone, brooding and morose, and drinking and smoking intensely.



Figure 6. George Johnston relieves the pressure. (James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

Just as Johnston conspired with Burke's lens to produce a public account of the writer abroad, so too in these domestic photos we can sense a conscious projection of another aspect of his literary persona, that of the struggling, brittle and anguished author. Which is not to suggest that there is not 'truth' to be found in these images—as early as their first year on Hydra the pressure on Johnston and the related changes in his demeanour were apparent to Clift, as was her husband's failure to create the fiction to which he aspired.

From being a gregarious, warm-hearted, talkative, generous, and romantic fellow he has become suspicious, moody, unfriendly, irritable, and despairing. His work is causing him concern. Nothing seems to go right with it, although he works harder than ever, patiently exploring every avenue, every corridor of possibility . . . (*Peel* 163)

These images captured by Burke can only exist, however, because Johnston was willing to share this aspect of his experience with his friend, and to display for the camera the disjunctions that existed between the public face of his expatriation, and the deeply felt self-doubt and concern about the point to which he had brought his family, and possibly his own failure as a writer.

It is therefore appropriate that the Johnston house was also the setting for an extensive series of photos depicting Johnston toiling at his typewriter. These images in particular project Johnston's identification of himself as a serious author whose purpose for being on Hydra was to write. Both Johnston and Clift were prone to pointing out how much harder they worked than many of Hydra's expatriates, as if emphasising to the doubters in Australia that their decision to move there was determined by the need to find an ideal creative environment rather than to simply enjoy a leisured island lifestyle.



Figure 7. George Johnston expresses frustration at the Remington.
(James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

In many of these photographs Burke has framed Johnston in such a way that he is seemingly ‘imprisoned’ in his writing room by the vertical bars of the room divider, suggesting the extent to which he was tethered to Hydra by his desire to write. Clift describes just such moments in *Peel Me a Lotus*, on one occasion juxtaposing Johnston’s passion for the opportunities provided by his expatriation to the experience of their children being educated at the local school.

While I work I can hear the dull thudding of George’s typewriter up in the studio—that familiar intermittent chatter that has been the background to all my married life, and the children chanting their alpha-beta. Sing-song and hypnotic it comes from the Down School and breaks finally into a charming and innocent-sounding rendering of the newest revolutionary Cyprus song. (*Peel* 121)

Clift’s conflating of the activities within the home and the school serves to highlight the expatriate’s dislocation, a state that can often be reflected within his or her own family, and the differing levels of immersion in local cultures that will be experienced across the generations. Burke’s images of Johnston bent over his Remington, typing in English, are challenged by those of Martin Johnston bent over and reading intensely a Greek-language newspaper’s report on the success of the Athens-based Panathinaikos football team.



Figure 8. Martin Johnston reads the sporting news.
(James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

Having been schooled on the island in Greek, the Clift-Johnston children were often called upon to negotiate the language and culture for their parents. As the couple’s biographers Garry Kinnane (Johnston) and Nadia Wheatley (Clift) confirm, in a decade of living on Kalymnos and Hydra, neither Johnston nor Clift acquired more than basic Greek, and as Jorge Sotirios has pointed out, ‘Martin often acted as interpreter, the lot of children of migrants

everywhere.’ Sotirios uses the couple’s failure to acquire Greek as a marker of a particular type of literary expatriation wherein engagement with local communities never progresses beyond the essential and superficial, and ‘whether to Tuscany or Tangiers, creative freedom and nice weather entice the writer abroad, and rarely to another language.’

Burke’s photographs certainly provide ample evidence of Johnston and Clift cocooned by the expatriate community amongst whom English was the shared language, but perhaps this view of the couple as ‘deliberate outsiders,’ in Sotirios’ phrase, gives a far too simple account of their status, and one that is elsewhere contested by Burke’s photographs and other evidence. In a recent interview, Australian novelist and poet Rodney Hall, who with his wife and child spent several months on Hydra in 1964, for part of which they were living in the Johnston house, provides a similar account of the couple’s language skills but a different interpretation of their status.

George and Charmian never learnt Greek. Charmian had just a few phrases, but after all these years she had very little and what she had was pronounced extremely badly, and George had none at all. Nevertheless they completely fitted into the community. The community understood who they were, understood they intended to stay, understood their children were going to the local school, understood that they intended to live there the rest of their lives and being buried there. And they were totally accepted and as far as I can see the Hydriots were really quite proud of them, they quite liked having them. (Hall)

Hydra was an island adjusting to an economy that was increasingly based on tourism, much of it consisting of day-trippers from Athens, supported by a summer ‘season’ of longer stays by northern Europeans maximising the seasonal sunshine, and Americans attending the well-established art school. But the population was continually shrinking as the island failed to sustain a year-round economy and jobs, and from a peak of over 30,000 in the nineteenth century was reduced to less than 3,000 by 1960. Johnston and Clift were exceptions, in being amongst the first foreigners to purchase a house on the island in 1956, and Clift often boasted that their third child, Jason, was the first non-Greek to be born on the island. Irrespective of their failure to acquire passable Greek, they were nonetheless recognised by the Hydriots as being committed to the point where (in Hall’s terms) their choice to settle on Hydra was seen as validating the island and its native residents.

On a number of occasions, however, Burke’s photographs record moments experienced by Clift, Johnston and the wider expatriate group that depict these expatriates as an insular ‘community’ or ‘colony.’ Although neither of these terms should be accepted uncritically they are nonetheless used frequently in describing the Hydra expatriates and inflect both the public and academic discourse around the experience of this early manifestation of a 1960s counter-culture. Certainly the role of Johnston and Clift in the formation of the artist-community is a central, taken-for-granted element of the ‘myth’ of the couple’s years on the island.

One of the summer gathering places for the expatriates was the rocky swimming spot of Spilia. Swimming was a pastime almost exclusively for the island’s visitors, with the Hydriots unaccustomed to the practice due to over-familiarity with the dangers of the sea and customs of modesty regarding public dress. Gathering at Spilia at the bottom of ‘twenty descending stairs, [with] rock platforms cemented over to make sun-bathing levels’ (*Peel* 89) was therefore something which marked out a social and leisure activity confined to the expatriates, and it is little surprise that Clift, a keen lifelong swimmer, found her way there regularly, as

did Burke with his camera on at least one occasion. Burke recorded Clift and Johnston, and Leonard Cohen and his partner Marianne Ihlen, in numerous shots both relaxing on the concrete steps and swimming, surrounded by a wider group of the island's expatriates and visitors.



Figure 9. Charmian Clift (back to camera), Marianne Ihlen and Leonard Cohen, Spilia, Hydra. (James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

Burke's images evoke the several passages in *Peel Me a Lotus* wherein Clift extols her love of swimming, associating it with her desire 'to live in the sun. To live in the sun is reassuring. All is open, all revealed . . . we are stripped to our bare selves' (90). And as she looks over the scatter of swimmers and sun-bakers across the rocks at Spilia she is irresistibly drawn to wonder at the haphazard nature of the decision to expatriate and the uncertainties it produces in the lives of those who take the decision.

It is a diverse and tantalizing collection of human beings sprawled about these rocks and ledges on a hot cliff far from their native lands, insurgents all who have rebelled against the station in which it pleased God to place them. What devious roads brought them to this small island, what decisions and indecisions, what driftings, what moments of desperation and hope? . . . What do they expect to find here, an Australian journalist, an Irish school-master, an American misfit, an exotic outsider from the St.-Germain-des-Pres? (*Peel*, 97)

It was also perhaps this unlikely swimming spot, sculpted from rock, which allowed Clift to keep in touch with aspects of her childhood in the seaside town of Kiama in New South Wales, where she first learnt to swim and dive, on beaches and rocky headlands similar to Spilia. If expatriation is, according to one understanding, a form of ‘flight,’ then it is in the performance of flight in the act of diving that momentarily allows Clift to leave her new island-home both physically and imaginatively.



Figure 10. Charmian Clift, Spilia, Hydra. (James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

. . . how fine and free to dive from the highest rock above the cave-lip, willing one’s spread arms to hold one arched in air. It was a day to attempt the unreasonable, so close it seemed, so almost within one’s power to defy the laws of gravity. Launched in an arc above the waiting sea it seemed possible that one might hang there for a moment before the downward plunge . . . or even soar on, on and on like a bird soaring across the brilliant gulf. (*Peel* 91)

It is not too fanciful to believe that in moments like these Clift imagined herself soaring across the ‘brilliant gulf’ and eventually alighting on those other beaches and swimming places she had known during her Australian childhood.

Burke also photographed the expatriates relaxing extravagantly on the island’s other, and more prominent, edge—that narrow stretch of the Hydra waterfront that served as their

principle recreational space. In one striking series of photographs he depicts what appears to be a long and relaxed lunch on the picturesque dockside, built again around the core group of Johnston, Clift, Cohen and Ihlen.



Figure 11. Marianne Ihlen (and baby Axel), Leonard Cohen, David Goschen, George Johnston, Charmian Clift, Hydra waterfront.
(James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

In this series of photographs Burke has seemingly framed each image as an invitation, with the table opening out before the camera as if offering space for the viewer to join the conviviality. The exposed side of the table likely indicates the absence of Burke himself, his unattended meal conspicuously put aside as he works his camera to record a succession of expats consecutively joining the table, stopping, chatting, and then moving on. It was a situation that Clift knew so well—perhaps a daily ritual at the heart of the experience of being part of this expatriate group.

Here on the waterfront there is always company. It is easy to join a group around a plastic tablecloth and a flask of wine, and to sit for hours, gossiping, watching the evening promenade go by, conscious that one's skin is still salty and one's hair still damp from swimming, that one's limbs are relaxed, that one is not really attentive at all. Chitter, chitter, chitter, the conversation spurts and falls and chitters on again, idle, derisive, malicious—summer talk. (*Peel* 122)

'Talk' appears to have been the common currency of the expats. With time on their hands and the encouragement of cheap alcohol, the literary ambitions so many of them shared were manifested in long afternoons and evenings during which;

. . . we talk, individually, severally, and at last all together, hurling and snatching at creeds, doctrines, ideas, theories, ranging through space and time like erratic

meteorites rushing on in the full spate of our ignorance as to either our origins or destinations, until at last we come to the blazing point of exhaustion. (*Peel* 40)

Clift reported in *Peel Me a Lotus* the problems of living amongst a small community in a confined island space. For whereas she and Johnston have gone to Hydra with a real purpose—to make a home, raise a family, and make a living by writing—Clift was also aware of the dangers to the couple's literary ambition of living within the small community of islanded expatriates, and of surrounding themselves with those she called 'The *poste-restante*, interchangeable, culture addicted, Europe-sick boys' (*Peel* 137). Needless to say the very things that made Hydra attractive to Clift and Johnston—abundant sunshine; the well-stocked and cheap marketplace; the reassuring enactment of authentic local ritual—also made it increasingly enticing to a generation adrift in a post-war Europe beset by ongoing reconstruction and the menace of the Cold War. The more immediate concern for Clift, however, was her ambivalent response to these itinerant wanderers who 'have declared not only against the rat-race of modern life, but against life itself' (128).

Inevitably we all meet again, and yet again. We are endlessly meeting . . . the same people over and over again, endlessly meeting . . . Always the same conversation, yesterday, today, tomorrow, the same smart verbal catch-ball with obscure poets and philosophers, the same Freudian terms, the same 'frank' piggery, the same shafts of malice and spite, the same derisive laughter. (*Peel* 128)

But for Clift the problems were greater than the tedium of repeated conversation. From her position as a permanent resident she vented her frustration at her fellow expatriates who not only failed to settle, but also—more grievously—failed to commit to their art. As a result their accomplishments amounted to no more than a smattering of European languages; distant encounters with the great and famous, and a familiarity with 'the reviews of the latest books and the latest plays' (*Peel* 135). As a result they face the expatriate's worst fear—of being stranded between cultures, bereft of home or purpose.

They were to be poets, to be painters, to be writers, come to drink in their culture at its source, the old mystic fountainhead. Perhaps their stomachs weren't strong enough, perhaps their gifts were weighed and found wanting, or perhaps that little private income, the remittance, made it all too easy to put off until tomorrow the actual hard work that might be involved in being the new young prophet.

And now, when they are no longer really young, and Europe is stale old ground, it is too late for them to begin and too late for them to go back. (*Peel* 137–38)

Not surprisingly, this explanation of the existential crisis of expatriation is more immediately expressed in prose than pictures. Burke's images of the expats at leisure on their picturesque island constantly risk producing clichés of neo-colonial fantasy, as indicated by a series of over a hundred photos taken at Douskos Taverna, a popular meeting place for talking, smoking and drinking. Across the course of an evening we witness people sitting in the appealing courtyard, laughing and singing, passing around drinks, coming and going, pulling up chairs, changing places and walking out of frame, while Leonard Cohen and Axel Jensen take turns strumming the guitar and leading the singing.



Figure 12. Expats at Douskos Taverna, including Redmond 'Bim' Wallis, Leonard Cohen, George Johnston, Charmian Clift, Marianne Ihlen, Axel Jensen, Demetri Gassoumis, Christopher Booker. (James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

Amongst those included in this expat circle are Australians, Americans, Canadians, Norwegians, New Zealanders, English and a Swede, and possibly other nationalities as well. Burke's photos leave a record of a harmonious and convivial evening, with this youthful and remarkably international group comfortable in each other's company. For Johnston and Clift, revelling in their role as the unappointed leaders of this contingent, such an evening could be seen to represent the very lifestyle—the heightened sociability, the ardent conversation, the embrace of cultural difference, the exotic appeal of foreign lands and accents—they had been seeking when they abandoned firstly, what they saw as the monochrome cultural sterility of post-war Sydney, and secondly drab, cold, expensive and ration-starved mid-50s London. Evenings such as this, Burke's photos seem to suggest, were the expat's reward.

Looking further at these pictures, however, beyond the immediate circle, outside the brightly-lit focus of the courtyard and against the taverna wall, we see several Greek men, quietly observing the boisterous sing-along and very likely also watching the cameraman at work. Their shadowy, almost spectral presence, whereby they are relegated to outsiders and observers, reminds us of the particular conditions of expatriation that prevailed on Hydra. Having previously experienced expatriate life in London, at the heart of the Anglo-sphere, Johnston and Clift knew how difficult it was for colonials to make an impression at the imperial centre; and also on Kalymnos, where, as virtually the only foreigners, they were simply curiosities and perhaps a conduit by which the poverty-stricken islanders might join the post-war exodus to Australia. In either case it was impossible for them to reproduce their status as the 'golden boy' and his 'ardent ingénue' (Wheatley 217) that had seen them win major literary prizes and effortlessly provoke scandal in Melbourne and Sydney. But on Hydra things were different again, and their near-decade of permanent residency and role as

the key members of the swelling ranks of artistically ambitious expats set them apart and made them objects of fascination to the local community at a time when the Aegean islands were a place for day-trippers and tourists rather than those who would settle, buy houses and pursue their livelihood. As Sotirios has noted, 'The artistic colony appeared worldly and rich, and speaking English and French intimidated the islanders: Hydriots felt like yokels in comparison. A two-tier society was in place, the locals and the outsiders kept apart by lifestyle and language.' While this claim should be taken seriously, Burke's photographs also suggest the possibility of other kinds of social arrangements and exchanges between the expatriates and the Hydriot community. At the least, they ask for a recognition, and re-examination, of how the Hydra expatriates are comprehended and remembered.

For example, Burke's photographs also further mark out, inadvertently (or perhaps not), the degrees of separation between the international artist-community and the Hydriots. In a sequence of photographs that could almost be a consciously-created reflection of the Douskos photographs, Burke records another guitar centred sing-along, in a bar at the rear of Katsikas grocery store.



Figure 13. Unidentified Hydriots, Katsikas store and café, Hydra.
(James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

On this occasion there is a group of a dozen or so Greeks, pictured again in mid-conviviality, once more singing, talking and drinking, albeit in a space that at other times was dominated by the expatriates (depending on the season, the front or the rear of Katsikas served as the 'headquarters' for Johnston and Clift), but on this night there is nary an expat in sight. Except there was, of course, at least one present – Burke with his camera.

Burke's photographs at Douskos and Katsikas might well be making the point—look how similar these two groups might appear to be; but look also at how separate they are. But then again, perhaps the two groups are not entirely separate at all. Just as the expats at Douskos

found themselves gazed upon by the Hydriots, Clift in *Peel Me a Lotus* reported scenes similar to that recorded by Burke, where she and Johnston are the observers hovering on the fringes of the singing locals, even to the point of hesitantly participating.

Sometimes Vassilis the crippled sponge-diver joins in, or Tzimmy the pedlar . . . Vassilis sings, stretching wide the gaping hole of his mouth over two yellow teeth that look like the temple at Corinth; the young labourer Apostoli sings to the plaintive accompaniment of his guitar; in the dark corner the old men sing, quaveringly and off-key. And sometimes we sing too—folk songs half remembered or the nostalgic dance tunes that date our love days. (40)

Elsewhere, Burke's photographs offer tantalisingly supportive evidence for Hall's claim about the couple's acceptance by the Hydriots. In one sequence of over thirty photographs we see a social gathering of nearly twenty people. There are only three of the expatriate community present, Johnston, Clift and American Carolyn Gassoumis. The only other person currently identified is Katerina Paouri, reputedly the island's wealthiest resident, and it is likely that the photographs were taken at Paouri's house. In these images we see Johnston and Clift, together and apart, moving round the room, sitting and standing—Clift quite smartly dressed and Johnston's clothes notably threadbare ('not a garment among us but has a variegated pattern of darns and patches or is held together by pins or bits of string' [*Peel* 126]). The couple seem fully at ease, chatting amicably and working the room in order to speak with all those present, with Johnston apparently as garrulous as his reputation suggests, and Clift less demonstrative but equally sociable. Carolyn Gassoumis, by contrast, often appears ill-at-ease, standing apart from conversations, clutching a drink tightly, her posture and expression betraying her discomfort.



Figure 14. Carolyn Gassoumis (far left), George Johnston, Charmian Clift, and unidentified others, house of Katerina Paouri(?), Hydra.
(James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

Yet another series of photographs depicts Johnston and Clift visiting Katerina Paouri's house, again with Carolyn Gassoumis and this time accompanied by Englishman David Goschen; and yet another series pictures Johnston, Clift and their children visiting the house of Mrs Kiki Papastratos and her daughters, again an interaction that seems fully relaxed and comfortable. Elsewhere we see Johnston hosting a gathering at the front of Katsikas cafe for Greek painter Nikos Hadjikyriakos-Ghikas. None of this 'proves' very much—it is of course possible that these photographs were all effectively staged to meet the needs of the photographer and his subjects—but it also certainly suggests that Johnston and Clift (at least) were more integrated with the Hydriots than other sources have suggested, and that their expatriation has a richer and more complex history than their labelling as members of a 'colony' implies.

Burke's photographs, and what they illustrate and suggest about the relationships on Hydra are therefore reminders of something that was increasingly apparent to Johnston and Clift—that the lived experience of expatriation is rarely simple or straightforward. It is a complex state of being, and whether socialising with the smart sets of Soho, or roistering with an oddly ambitious coterie of counter-cultural misfits in the Aegean, Johnston and Clift found themselves buffeted by the uncertain allegiances, desires and life-opportunities that shape the expatriates' relationships with people and place.



Figure 15. Unidentified man, Charmian Clift, Robyn Wallis, George Johnston, Redmond 'Bim' Wallis. Katsikas store and café. (James Burke: The LIFE Picture Collection)

And finally, yet another group of photos show the Johnstons amid ‘the six deal tables at the back of Anthony and Nick Katsikas’ grocery store at the end of the cobbled waterfront’ (*Peel* 15), enjoying a lunch or drink with New Zealander ‘Bim’ Wallis and his wife Robyn, and with members of the Katsikas family glimpsed through the doorway going about their shop-front business. Who knows—perhaps Johnston and Wallis are discussing plans for their great national novels, or maybe they are arguing about who will buy the next retsina. Clift, however, turns away from her husband, engaged in seemingly casual but earnest conversation with an elderly Greek man. This is an image captured without guile; a simple rendering of an otherwise insignificant moment ‘among the flour-sacks and oil-jars and painted tin water-tanks and strings of onions and soft white festoons of cotton-waste’ (*Peel* 15). During their Hydra years Clift and Johnston must have had a myriad of such fleeting and immediately forgotten encounters which, fixed and framed by Burke’s photographs, are irretrievably tethered to the instant of their taking, as certainly as they are available at the time of their (present) consumption. To the scrutinising eye they are capable of expressing multiple, or even contesting, narratives, including in this case, fantasies of expatriate self-indulgence; productive cross-cultural communication; the fluctuating fortunes of literary nationalism; and a Europe infested by aimless (if oftentimes agreeable) wanderers. When Susan Sontag described photographs as ‘clouds of fantasy and pellets of information’ (69), she might well have had in mind Burke’s images of post-war literary expatriation on Hydra. On one hand they weave an exoticised narrative of neo-colonial fantasy that seemingly roots them in a romantic vision of fading Mediterranean glamour, and on the other they adhere to their photo-journalistic roots by delivering otherwise irretrievable insights into the (imagined?) lives of those who were there, at *that* place, and in *that* moment.

John Berger has written that, ‘The contemporary public photograph usually presents an event, a seized set of appearances, which has nothing to do with us, its readers, or with the original meaning of the event . . . If the public photograph contributes to a memory, it is to the memory of an unknowable and total stranger. The violence is expressed in that strangeness. It records an instant sight about which this stranger has shouted: Look!’ (52). And to quote Susan Sontag again, ‘A photograph is only a fragment, and with the passage of time its moorings come unstuck’ (71). Such observations challenge us to treat photos such as Burke’s with caution—these images are time-travellers after all, not to mention that positivist claims made for and by photographs are suspect(ed). In the end, Burke’s photographs do not, cannot, ‘get’ to the final truth of Clift and Johnston’s example of Australian expatriation, perhaps any more than Clift managed to reveal in *Peel Me a Lotus*; or Johnston achieved in *Clean Straw for Nothing*, or than Humphries’ Ocker parodies reveal of being Australian in Earls Court. Or, perhaps more to the point, these photographs question the motivations of such a quest, and in this sense it seems crucial not to approach them as substitutes for memory or history, but as adjunct representations of ineradicably complex realities.

Seen in this way, Burke’s photographs offer more than an encapsulation of a transitory moment in Hydra’s long history of travel, leisure, commerce and artistic endeavour. As viewers attuned to the ubiquity of travel photography and portraiture, we can pause to reflect on our experience of looking at and reading such images; of how the photograph composes and narrativises the notion of being somewhere else as an exotic experience that inevitably invites the viewer to imaginatively occupy the ‘place’ of the subject. Yes, in Burke’s photographs are clichés of Mediterranean tourism in the form of donkeys and markets and boats and taverns and hard-working peasants, and there is also Leonard Cohen playing a guitar, George Johnston typing, Charmian Clift diving, and any number of others enjoying the benefits of living cheaply in the sunshine amid great beauty. But also ‘seen’ is the art of the

photographer, the limits of his equipment, the long reach of global capitalism, the passing of the post-war, the advent of counter-cultures, the dawning of the bohemian sixties, and the demise of one version of the Aegean—and look closely enough and there might be found traces of the ‘complex dissolution of the human soul.’ And further, because photographs do not preserve meaning, as Berger has pointed out, but rather offer presences prised from their meaning, then only so much can be asked of Burke’s photographs and their picturing of expatriation. Whether or not expatriation was a world problem that a national literature might remedy, as Johnston provocatively asserted, is a question impossible for Burke’s photographs to answer, even as they pose it anew.

WORKS CITED

- Alomes, Stephen. *When London Calls: The Expatriation of Australian Creative Artists to Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.
- Bennett, Bruce and Anne Pender. *From a Distant Shore: Australian Writers in Britain 1820–2012*. Clayton: Monash University Publishing, 2013.
- Berger, John. *Understanding a Photograph*. New York: Aperture, 2013.
- Britain, Ian. *Once an Australian: Journeys with Barry Humphries, Clive James, Germaine Greer and Robert Hughes*. Melbourne: Oxford UP, 1997.
- Burgin Victor. ‘Looking at Photographs.’ *Thinking Photography*. Ed. Victor Burgin. London: Macmillan, 1982: 142–216.
- Clift, Charmian. *Peel Me a Lotus*. London: Hutchinson, 1959.
- . *The World of Charmian Clift*. Sydney: Ure Smith, 1970.
- Conrad, Peter. *Tales of Two Hemispheres: Boyer Lectures 2004*. Sydney: ABC, 2004.
- Dixon, Robert. ‘Australian fiction and the world republic of letters, 1890–1950.’ *The Cambridge History of Australian Literature*. Ed. Peter Pierce. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009: 225–54.
- Genoni, Paul and Tanya Dalziell. ‘Charmian Clift and George Johnston, Hydra 1960: the ‘lost’ photographs of James Burke.’ *Meanjin* 73, 1 (2014): 18–37.
- Hall, Rodney. Personal interview. 11 December 2014.
- Hergenhan, Laurie and Irmtraud Petersson, eds. *Changing Places: Australian Writers in Europe*. St Lucia: U of Queensland P, 1994.
- Kinnane, Garry. *George Johnston: A Biography*. Melbourne: Nelson, 1986.
- Lury, Celia. *Prosthetic Culture: Photography, Memory and Identity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- Mitchell, William J. *The Reconfigured Eye: Visual Truth in the Post-Photographic Era*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.
- Morton, Peter. *Lusting for London: Australian Expatriate Writers at the Hub of Empire, 1870–1950*. New York: Macmillan, 2011.
- Sayers, Stuart. ‘The expatriate returns home.’ *Age*. Thursday 14 August 1969: 6.
- Sontag, Susan. *On Photography*. London: Penguin, 1979.
- Sotirios, Jorge. ‘Who cares for Cohen.’ *Griffith Review* 29 (2010): 232–45.
- Sturken Maria and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001.
- Wheatley, Nadia. *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift*. Sydney: Harper Collins, 2001.